

*On the Writing
of English*

Ex Libris

C. K. OGDEN



THE LIBRARY
OF
THE UNIVERSITY
OF CALIFORNIA
LOS ANGELES

R. M. Lee May 12 1934



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2008 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation

On the Writing of English

BLACKIE & SON LIMITED

50 Old Bailey, LONDON

17 Stanhope Street, GLASGOW

BLACKIE & SON (INDIA) LIMITED

Warwick House, Fort Street, BOMBAY

BLACKIE & SON (CANADA) LIMITED

TORONTO

On the Writing of English

BY

GEORGE TOWNSEND WARNER, M.A.

Late Master of the Modern Side in Harrow School

BLACKIE & SON LIMITED

LONDON AND GLASGOW

*Printed in Great Britain by
Blackie & Son, Limited, Glasgow*

PE

1408

W24

To

R. A. B. C.

MY DEAR DICK,

You were the first boy to read this book, when it was still in the stage of type-script. True, I had you at an advantage; you were embarrassed with German measles, and, being shut out from the society over which you at that time ruled, you had to put up with my company. Some will hold that it was a shabby trick on my part to thrust the thing upon you; perhaps it was. But you read it through, offered some criticism, and hazarded the opinion that you might learn a good deal from it; and this you have certainly done, which encourages hope that others may do the same. So the book shall be inscribed to you—with gratitude for your help over this and many other more important things.

G. T. W.

1033335

Scholar.

“But you break all your own rules.”

Dominic.

“Not all, surely.”

CONTENTS

Introductory - - - - -	Page 1
------------------------	-----------

PART I

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM TEACHER—FROM TAUGHT

§ I. A Beginning - - - - -	7
§ II. On Thinking and Order - - - - -	9
§ III. On Order - - - - -	11
§ IV. On Order Again - - - - -	15
§ V. On Gathering Material - - - - -	16
§ VI. On Gathering Material - - - - -	23
§ VII. More about Paragraphs - - - - -	25
§ VIII. On Bad and Good English - - - - -	28
1. The Colloquial Style—"Talk" - - - - -	30
2. Journalese: The "Bad Newspaper" Style - - - - -	31
3. The Moralizing or "Sermony" Style - - - - -	32
4. Oratorical: The Speech Style - - - - -	33
5. Good English - - - - -	34
§ IX. Drunken Helots - - - - -	36
The Colloquial Style - - - - -	36
§ X. "Journalese" - - - - -	38
§ XI. The Moralizing or "Sermony" Style - - - - -	41
§ XII. The "Oratorical" or "Speech" Style - - - - -	44

	Page
§ XIII. Good English - - - - -	47
§ XIV. On Using the English of the Bible - - -	49
§ XV. The English of the Bible - - - -	51
§ XVI. The Writing of Good English - - -	55

PART II

ON PITFALLS

§ I. On Beginning - - - - -	59
§ II. On Beginning - - - - -	61
§ III. On Diving In - - - - -	63
§ IV. Mental Processes - - - - -	66
§ V. On Connecting-Strings: Particularly Con- junctions - - - - -	69
§ VI. On Abstracts - - - - -	72
§ VII. Wolf! Wolf! - - - - -	75
§ VIII. On "Succulent Bivalves" - - - -	80
§ IX. Some Common Mistakes - - - - -	83
§ X. On Ways into the Head - - - - -	85
§ XI. Of Sentences; and of Variety - - -	88

PART III

OF MERITS

§ I. On Having Something to Say - - - -	96
§ II. On Seeing - - - - -	97
§ III. On the Art of Choosing - - - - -	102
<i>An Interlude</i> - - - - -	108
§ IV. Some Further Words on Merits - - -	110
The Model Essay - - - - -	118
Envoi - - - - -	121

APPENDIX

	Page
Some Styles Considered - - - -	125
1. Bacon - - - - -	125
2. Bacon - - - - -	127
3. Emerson - - - - -	127
4. G. M. Trevelyan - - - - -	129
5. Macaulay - - - - -	130
6. G. M. Trevelyan - - - - -	132
7. G. K. Chesterton - - - - -	134
8. Charles Lamb - - - - -	136
9. Charles Lamb - - - - -	137
10. Charles Lamb - - - - -	138
11. R. L. Stevenson - - - - -	139
12. R. L. Stevenson - - - - -	140
13. R. L. Stevenson - - - - -	142
14. Hazlitt - - - - -	143
15. Two Brothers - - - - -	146
16. R. E. Prothero - - - - -	147
17. Mandell Creighton - - - - -	148
18. Bacon - - - - -	149
19. Emerson - - - - -	150
Some Scraps - - - - -	151
20. N. A. Walton - - - - -	152
21. Upon the Quality called Romance—with Some- thing that Dominie ought to have said before	155

Introductory

I KNOW, of course, that it is the present fashion among many to give up the setting of "Essays". It is absurd, they say, to expect such things of boys; therefore we will set them something more suited to boyish minds: we will ask them to describe a scene or an occurrence; to write a letter on some easy subject; to sum up the arguments for and against some proposal; but "Essays?"—No. Doubtless it is well to set subjects of which a boy can reasonably be expected to know something. But still, all the old mistakes which the boy made in his "Essay"—so called—come up again, and the old difficulties beset him. Lack of order, slang, pomposity, journalese, circumlocution, rhetoric, and cheap moralizing will not be rooted out of him by changing the name of what we tell him to write. For, in the end, we all want the same thing: we wish him to

think, and to write down his thoughts in good English; that is all.

That being so, I have tried to give help in *Essay-Writing*, because from older boys I cannot see that it is wrong to ask for an "Essay". They play with men's bats and cricket balls, and learn; they read men's books, and learn; they may equally well practise using their pens in the same grown-up style. Even if they fail, they are learning, just as they are learning in cricket and in letters. Besides, there is something stimulating in asking them to try a thing which presents difficulties. Intellectual pap is demoralizing. A boy who wishes to learn—and most do so wish—will often make better efforts to do what strikes him as "grown-up" than what seems "babyish", for his whole bent is to go forward into being man-like.

Yet if experience shows that most boys are anxious to learn to write better, it also shows that it is hard for them to learn. The best way to teach them is to take each boy himself, and correct and rebuild his "Essay" under his eye. But although boys are generally ready enough to give up time out of school for this purpose, it is often impossible for the teacher to find the time. With a form of twenty-four boys, even a quarter of an hour apiece means six hours in

the week added to a time-table, and it is easy to give half an hour to each essay without feeling that the time is too long. Nor are attempts to select out of the form satisfactory. To teach only the best ones, or only the worst ones, is unfair to the others. And though this individual teaching is unquestionably useful, it does in some ways involve a waste of time. The same things have to be said over and over to different boys. They do not all make the same mistakes, but certain types of mistakes occur often. Of course, a general criticism of the essays to the whole form has its uses, but one is bound to leave much of the ground unsearched; and besides, firing at large is not nearly so destructive—or instructive—as it should be.

Accordingly, I have tried to set down briefly the first principles of building up an "Essay"; the way to gather and sort material; then to reveal the commonest pitfalls which lie in wait for the beginner, and to put him on his guard against glaring mistakes. I have laid some stress on these, because unless a boy knows what is bad, and why it is bad, he has no standard by which to choose what is better. At the end I have tried to explain where merit lies. As my aim has been to write a book which

a boy can read for himself, I have sacrificed pedagogic decorum of instruction; and if now and then some reader may be tempted to read another page or two, to see what comes next, much has been done.

PART I

What to Expect
From Teacher—From Taught

§ I

A Beginning

TO begin with, you don't write "Essays", even when an "Essay" is set.

Essays are produced, not by boys, but by great writers and profound thinkers, such as Macaulay, Bacon, Emerson, and others. You cannot be either a great writer or a profound thinker yet awhile. Still, it pleases some teachers to say "Essays": it sounds well—just as we call a brief passage from North and Hillard, or Sidgwick "Latin Prose" and "Greek Prose". I sometimes wonder what Cicero or Plato would say about these if they saw them—or even the master's fair copy. . . .

However, your business is to write an English Essay, or something as near it as you can.

Why is it set to you? In doing it, what are you expected to show? These things first of all:—

1. That you can think a little and put your thoughts in order.

8 THE WRITING OF ENGLISH

2. That you can write plain brief English which every man can understand.
3. That you need not make a fool of yourself when you get a pen in your hand.

That is, really, about all. It doesn't sound very hard, does it? Let's set to work.

§ II

On Thinking and Order

OF course you have to do the thinking ; not I. Yet perhaps I can help you to stir your brains if they seem sulky.

As you are more or less beginners we will take something easy: say the "Place of Culture in National Life". Of course a flood of mixed ideas comes into your head about that. Well, then——

What's that you say? You have no ideas about it—you don't even understand?

Well, then, say so to your teacher. He is wrong; not you. It is not wise to shout it at him, then and there, in so many words; but go to him at the end of school, and hint to him that you haven't a single idea on the subject, and beg him to be so very kind as to explain a little. If several of you do this, we, who set the essays, will soon learn to set subjects which you do understand. Even we teachers are not always so stupid as you think.

Perhaps he will explain the subject, or tell you what to read. That will be plain enough. But suppose he doesn't; he prefers you to think, and sets something easier; let's say "Flowers".

That suggests a heap of things: write them all down just as they come. Roses, carnations, daisies, primroses, spring, gardens, colours of flowers, red, yellow, blue flowers, hot-house flowers, tropical flowers, cut flowers, button-holes, poppies, tall flowers, hollyhocks and dahlias, short flowers, sweet-smelling flowers, orchids, fuchsias, violets, daffodils, crocus, hyacinths, wild flowers, gardeners, flower shows, people who sell flowers in the street, artificial flowers, &c. Stop; that's heaps, thank you!

Heaps? A *Heap*, rather! Now we've got to sort that Heap; some of it we'll throw away, and we'll use the rest.

§ III

On Order

YOU'VE heard of "Paragraphs" and of "Sentences". The next thing is to grasp the meaning and use of them.

A *Sentence* states a fact or opinion.¹

A *Paragraph* deals with one *Aspect or Division of a Subject*. Thus it follows that generally it will take several sentences to make a Paragraph. We cannot say all we want about one Aspect or Division of a Subject in one sentence unless we make it yards long, and that is not a good plan. A number of sentences go to make up a Paragraph.

"But," you say, "what do you mean by an Aspect or Division of a Subject? I don't quite understand."

Of course not. Let's take an example. Let's go back to that Heap and see what's in it.

Take another piece of paper and begin to

¹ It may also give a command or ask a question; but for our purposes we can neglect these uses.

sort it. "How?" Into *kinds of flowers*, if you like.

- A. Wild flowers: daisies, primroses, poppies, violets, and so on.
- B. Garden flowers: roses, carnations, hollyhocks, dahlias.
- C. Hot-house flowers: orchids, fuchsias, tropical flowers.

And thinking on these lines you can hit on plenty more of each kind which you will add to the list.

Or let's sort another way. "Spring flowers", that suggests "*Summer*" and "*Autumn*". Good.

- A. Spring flowers: daisies, primroses, crocus, daffodil, violets, hyacinths.
- B. Summer flowers: roses, carnations, hollyhocks, geraniums.
- C. Autumn flowers: dahlias (don't seem to have got many of them—must think of some more—um!—chrysanthemums—yes, and—well, anyhow, all the leaves turn red; we'll make *that* do. Precisely.)
- D. Winter flowers: Christmas roses, snowdrops, and flowers grown under glass.

Or, again, by *colours*, if you like—

- A. Red.
- B. Blue.
- C. White.
- D. Yellow.

Or, if you wish, by whether they *smell* or not—

- A. Scented flowers.
- B. Unscented flowers.

Or, again, *in country and town*—

- A. The wild flowers and common garden flowers, and the gardener.
- B. The hot-house and flower-shows.
- C. Buttonholes and the flower-sellers.
- D. Artificial flowers.

Here, you see, we use some of the stuff we threw away in the earlier choices.

Or, once more, concentrating our thoughts a little, we might write on three or four *national* flowers—

- A. The Rose of England.
- B. The Lilies of France.
- C. The Scottish Thistle.
- D. The Daffodil of Wales. (Mr. Lloyd George assured us that it is not the leek.)

Now then, these A's, B's, C's, and D's are all Divisions or Aspects of the Subject, and what we have to say about each we say in a lot of *Sentences*, combined in one *Paragraph*. See?

§ IV

On Order Again

WHAT you have to do, then, is: *first*, to jot down all the thoughts that come into your head about your subject on one piece of paper—that's the "Heap"; then to *think* what divisions you can sort them into; then to choose which *one* of these sets of divisions you prefer for your Essay, and to re-arrange your Heap on that plan (throwing away what you do not want). This is your "Skeleton" or "Syllabus". Finally, to write your Essay *with the plan before you* to guide you in order and in the making of paragraphs.

Yes, I dare say you think this will be a deal of trouble; but it is the right plan.

If every teacher always made you show up, with your Essay, both your "Heap" and your "Skeleton", he would teach you much more quickly. Besides, he would probably be content with a shorter Essay, because he would be able to see that you really had worked at it.

§ V

On Gathering Material

BUT, you say, “‘*Flowers*’ was so easy. Any fool could think of something to put about that. What if I am set something which he says I ought to know about, and I can’t think of anything?”

Very well; if your mind is lazy we must find something to stir it up—some sort of tonic or stimulant.

Suppose he sets you “Reptiles”, or one of the cardinal virtues, “Mercy”, “Charity”, or “Almsgiving”. Good men are fond of setting subjects of this kind (although they ought not to do it, for reasons which I will explain by and by).

Anyhow, there you are with one of these things to floor you. You keep on mumbling “Reptiles”, or “Almsgiving”, or “Mercy”, as the case may be, and nothing inside you answers. The “Heap” won’t grow. What’s to be done?

Of course you *can* go and bother your friends

about Reptiles, but that is not much good. Their minds are not likely to be very active on your behalf. They may hint that you are one and had better crawl away.

So then you go off to books. You turn up "Reptiles" in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, and find forty huge pages of tiny print; plunging into them you arrive after a column or two at this:

"Stannius interpreted the characteristics of the Amphisbænoids differently as will be seen from the following abstract of his classification:

Subclassis Amphibia Maropnoa (Leuckart).

Sect. I. Streptostylica (Stann.). Quadrate bone articulated to the skull.

Ordo I. Ophidia.

Subordo I. Eurystomata or Macrostromata (Müll.)."

Hereabouts you feel you are getting out of your depth, so you turn on in the article to "Snakes", where you find "Order of OPHIDIA. Snakes (see SNAKES)". So then you see SNAKES and find ten pages more beginning:

"SNAKES constitute an order (Ophidia) in the class of Reptiles which is characterized by an exceedingly elongate body, cylindrical or sub-cylindrical, and terminating in a tapering tail." You decide that this really is not much help. On the other hand, the *Encyclopædia* knows nothing whatever of "Mercy" or "Almsgiving". So

you put the volume back in the elegant revolving bookcase of fumed oak (supplied gratis by the *Times*) and wonder what to do next.

Try this. Say to yourself: What? Where? When? How? Why? and take a piece of paper.

	REPTILES.	MERCY.	ALMSGIVING.
What?	What sorts of Reptiles do I know? What are the common ones? the rare ones? What do the different kinds do? What do they eat? What are their habits? What are the English reptiles?	What is Mercy? What are the results of it on the person who is merciful or who receives mercy? Is it the same as forgiveness?	What is Almsgiving? Is it giving money only? Is giving away what you don't need almsgiving? Who give alms? What is the result of giving alms?
Where?	Where do the different kinds live? Where do we see them? Where are they commonest? (Examples.)	Do men show mercy in war? to beasts? to children? Where don't they show it?	In church. In the streets. Hospital Sunday.
When?	When do we find them? Were they more common in old days or now? When are they active? harmful? useful?	When it is right to show mercy? Always? Were men always as merciful as they are now?	When do men give alms? Christmas - time in the streets; and in cold weather; in church.

	REPTILES.	MERCY.	ALMSGIVING.
How?	How do they move? find their food? injure people? grow? spend the winter?	How can we show mercy? The opportunities that come. Cruelty to animals; mercy in war to the wounded; to the poor and down-trodden.	How can alms be given wisely? How are they given? How can we find the people who deserve them? Is it good for people to give alms to them?
Why?	Why do we call them reptiles? Why dislike them? all of them? Why are people un-kind to harmless reptiles?	Why do men show mercy (savages don't)? When did they begin to learn?	Why do we give alms? Because we are sorry? Because we think it right? Because it does good? Because it makes us feel more comfortable when we pass a shivering beggar?

There, you see, we have now got three tolerable Heaps: the first one better than the other two; but then, remember, I told you that *Mercy* and *Almsgiving* were not good subjects for you.

Remember, also, that these *are* only *Heaps*. They are not arranged in Paragraphs or Divisions. You have to sort them as you sorted the Heap of Flowers.

But, you see, by knowing what sort of questions to ask your mind you have made it think *something*. This “*What? Where? When? How? Why?*” plan is not necessary. You ought soon to be able to do without it. When you were learning to walk you were glad of your nurse’s hand or of a chair to push about the nursery; but you soon outgrew them. You cannot run till you have learnt to walk; you cannot even walk till you have learnt to toddle with someone’s help. This is a way to teach your reluctant mind to toddle.

Besides, some day in an examination you will find yourself face to face with some subject on which you have, as you think, little to say. You cannot ask a friend; you cannot take in the twenty-six volumes of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* hidden about your person. Fall back, then, on *When? Where? What? How? Why?* Add *Who?* if you like.

These questions act as Mental Tin-openers.

AN EXAMPLE

Here is an example of using this method applied to a simple subject.

The exercise set was: “A Letter from a Roman Centurion on Service with Julius Cæsar’s force in Britain”. Ask yourself questions.

- Who?* Centurion, Roman. What legion? Who were the Britons? Who won? Who was killed? To whom was he writing?
- When?* Year, month. What time of year? Did they fight by day or make night attacks? or on the march? Any pitched battles?
- Why* was the force there? Why did he write?
- Where* did they land? march? halt? fight? first see Britons? Where did they get to?
- What* did the troops do? get to eat? see? (roads, villages). What was their talk like? What would strike him in their methods? What was the country like?
- How* did they get there? How did the Britons fight? How did they live (their habits, food, cattle, clothes, houses)?

This wants sorting; so go over it and mark the order in which you will use it. First, the letter must be from a definite person. He is a Centurion (an officer) and a Roman, i.e. he is used to Italy, a warm country. Make up your mind to whom he is writing—whether, say, to his wife, or to his son, or to a brother officer—because the kind of letter he will write will depend on this. This person must have a Latin name, and your letter must be dated. Date it in the Roman style (Latin Grammar), and you had best find out, if you can, what legions Cæsar had with him. Hence we mark A 1, A 2, &c., on our list, and set them down on our “Syllabus” or “Skeleton”, which grows thus under our pen.

Remember, he will tell things more or less in the *order* in which they happened to him. This will make our first paragraph, which we may call *First Impressions*. So we group: “How he got there—the crossing—the landing—their marches—their first sight of Britons—who won—men killed, few or many (any personal friend?)—what they got to eat (soldiers much interested in this). B 1, B 2, &c.”

Next he would write of *the Britons as fighters* in his second paragraph. The Britons and their arms? any night attacks? fighting on the march? any pitched battles? Britons' methods? had they horses? chariots? did they charge? yell? or attack quietly from behind the trees? C 1, C 2, C 3, &c.

Next he would write of *the Britons as he saw them* when they had submitted—their habits, food, cattle, clothes, houses, villages. D 1, D 2, D 3, &c.

Finally (if you want some more), he would describe *the country* they passed through. Weather, forests, rivers, roads, fields, crops, kind of trees, and so on. E 1, E 2, E 3, &c.

Some of our stuff, you observe, we have left unused, and when we have done, our *Heap* appears like this:

Who? Centurion. (A 1) Roman. (A 2) What legion? (A 5)
Who were the Britons? Who won? (B 5) Who
was killed? (B 6) To whom was he writing? (A 3)

When? Year, month. (A 4) What time of year? (E 1) Did
they fight by day or by night? (C 2) or on the
march? (C 3) any pitched battles? (C 4)

Why was the force there? Why did he write?

Where did they land? (B 2) march? (B 3) halt? (B 3) fight?
first see Britons? (B 4) Where did they get to? (E 2)

What did the troops do? get to eat? (B 7) see (roads and vil-
lages, &c.)? (E 4) What was their talk like? (D 5)
What would strike them in their methods? (C 5)
What was the country like? (E 3)

How did they get there? (B 1) How did the Britons fight?
(C 1) How did they live? habits (D 1), food (D 2),
cattle (D 3), clothes (D 4), houses (D 5).

But we do not want the *Heap* any more. What we work from is our *Syllabus* or *Skeleton* or *Ideas sorted into order*, or whatever name you like to give it.

§ VI

On Gathering Material

SOMETIMES you will be told the names of books where you can get material; or you will have to write about some question of the day, such as "The Trouble in the Balkans",¹ where you will find stuff in the papers.

That seems simple.

One piece of advice even here. *Read first, write afterwards*; or, better—using someone else's phrase—*Read yourself full: write yourself empty*.

That is, do all the reading you need, jot down notes, go over them again to see you remember, and then resolutely put the books away *before you begin to write*. Otherwise, if the book is open before you, you are sure to look into it for a word. One word becomes two, and two grow into a sentence, and before you know it you are copying wholesale.

¹ Which is no longer the question of the day: but no example that one can choose will remain of "the day".

Lazy fools do copy. But then you are not one, and you want to do an "Essay". Shut up that book then, and put it away before you begin to write.

§ VII

More about Paragraphs

ONE thing further concerning paragraphs. As you have seen, a paragraph should deal with one aspect or division of the subject. Plainly, then, a paragraph should not, in general, be short; it should consist of a number of sentences, all developing your ideas on the particular aspect of the subject in hand. If you will study any of Macaulay's paragraphs you will see this most clearly, for no writer equals Macaulay in the marshalling of matter. His essays move with the dignity of a pageant, each item in its place, each bearing witness to something of itself, and yet each a necessary part of the whole. If you were—audaciously—to prune Macaulay, the gap would immediately show. It follows from this that every properly-constructed paragraph will contain what is sometimes called a *topic phrase*—a phrase, that is to say, which introduces or explains the topic of the paragraph—much in the same way as the

label on your portmanteau sets forth its destination. You will commonly find this topic phrase somewhere near the beginning of the paragraph, but this is not always so: it would be monotonous if it were. But it must exist; and if on searching your own paragraphs you cannot decide what the topic phrase is, you may be sure they are ill-built.

Again, when you have decided what is the topic of each of your paragraphs, you will be able to see whether all that you have written is to the point. If so, your paragraphs will have what is called *unity*. But if something in the paragraph is wide of the topic phrase, then that is wrongly placed. It may be interesting, important, brilliant, or what not, but it has not found its right place. It indicates that your mind has wandered from the point; and that will make your reader's mind wander also.

The exceptions to the rule that paragraphs should be of considerable length are commonly these. It is sometimes permissible to begin with rather a short paragraph, particularly where this sets out the general lines on which the essay will run; or again, if you have something pithy or neat or forcible to say—an epigrammatic summing up of the whole—you may put it in a paragraph, all by itself. There is a famous

example in the Appendix. But remember that putting your happy thought by itself will call especial attention to it, so it must be something which genuinely merits attention.

In a word, before you decide to make something conspicuous, you must convince yourself that you are right to do it. Do not do it without thinking.

§ VIII

On Bad and Good English

YOU have got your material and your Skeleton. Now to put what you think on to paper.

Your teacher likes you to use good English. Of course you wish to oblige him, but the trouble is that in nine cases out of ten you don't know what "using good English" means.

The first thing to grasp is that we have all sorts of English, which we use for different things. We *talk* one way; we *speak* (i.e. make speeches or lecture) in another; we *write* in a third; I could even go further and say we *preach* in another way, and some newspaper men (true, only the bad ones) write in another fashion again.

You ought to be able to distinguish roughly between these styles. You ought not to write as if you were talking, or as if you were lecturing, or as if you were preaching; least of

all should you imitate the "bad newspaper" style.

Of course you say: "But *you* write just as if you were talking." Yes; but then this is intended to be talk. Your business is to write an "Essay".

Take an example. Let's take the same story and see how it is told in *talk*, reported in *bad newspaper style*, moralized over in the *sermon* style, *spoken* in a speech, and finally *written in English*.

Observe that I shall exaggerate these styles a little, to make the points clear. My "talk" will be a little slipshod, my "reporting" rather cheap, my oratory poor stuff, my moralizing rather "sermony".¹ Only I promise that no fault is to be found with the writing of the story.

¹The reader must not think I wish to make fun of sermons. I do not. It should be remembered that if it is hard to write a good essay, it is far harder to write or preach a good sermon. But as boys hear a good many sermons (in and out of church), and as they are often set subjects which seem to invite moralizing and good advice gratis, they *will* take the sermon style as the model for their essay. Naturally they write far worse sermons than they do essays, and when they—in all good faith—compose a bad sermon and show it up as an essay, the result is terrible. Therefore it is, in my judgment, needful to explain what the "bad sermon" style is.

I. THE COLLOQUIAL STYLE—"TALK"

What the Cyclist said to the Reporter

"You want to know what happened last night. I'll tell you. I was cycling down the Pimlico Road very late at night and I saw a chap lying by the side of the road. I jumped off and picked him up. He was half dazed and didn't even know where he was. Then he began to pull himself together a bit: told me he had been attacked by some roughs and robbed: they must have hit him a pretty good whack over the head and left him half dead in the gutter. He told me that a couple of motors passed directly after, and that he called for help but they wouldn't stop. He said he spotted the Bishop of Pimlico in one of 'em; seems to be a bit of a swell if he knows a bishop.

"After a bit he got better, and I found a cab and trundled him down to the Three Stars. I was in a hurry, so I told the landlord there to look after him. Oh yes, I did pay the cab; couldn't leave the old boy in the lurch.

"Never saw a Bobby the whole time."

2. JOURNALESE: THE BAD NEWSPAPER STYLE

How the Reporter wrote it. (Mind you, he was a bad Reporter and wrote for a poor kind of newspaper.)

ALLEGED ROBBERY WITH VIOLENCE

While riding his bicycle between two and three o'clock yesterday morning along the unfrequented locality of the Pimlico Road, a young man of foreign extraction named Josefs Movinsky perceived the body of an individual stretched apparently motionless in the gutter. He alighted from his machine and discovered that the victim of the occurrence had been assaulted by some criminals, who, after relieving him of his watch and all his available cash, had made off undetected. The unfortunate victim, who appears to be well-connected, has not yet been identified. He lies at present at the Three Stars Hotel in a critical condition whither his compassionate rescuer escorted him in a cab. Hopes are entertained of his ultimate recovery. The police are on the alert.

3. THE MORALIZING OR "SERMONY" STYLE

The recent deplorable outrage on the Pimlico Road must not be allowed to pass without our drawing some lessons from it. Does it not bring home to us the terrible insecurity which pervades our life even in the twentieth century? That it should be possible for such an occurrence to take place on so frequented a highway is astonishing. It is surely time that some steps were taken for the better policing of this important thoroughfare, and we may confidently hope that the offenders will be detected and punished. The young man Josefs Movinsky is deserving of the highest praise; although we gather that he is not an Englishman, he has shown that ready compassion that unites the kind hearts of all nations. Indeed, he went further, even assisting the sufferer at his own expense: his conduct indeed offers a lesson to some of our own young people who, we fear, might not have been equally ready to assist, and is an instructive comment upon the attitude of those who condemn unheard all alien immigration. We have the authority of the Right Reverend the Bishop of Pimlico's chauffeur for saying that his Lordship saw what he took to be a drunken man sitting by the roadside.

4. ORATORICAL: THE SPEECH STYLE

What Counsel said when defending the thieves who were put on trial. (He was a young barrister, so he wanted to make the most of his chance.)

Now, gentlemen, let us examine this story. Let us look closely into it. It is said that the accused were on the Pimlico Road after midnight on that day, but no evidence is offered. Who saw them? No one, gentlemen. Bear that in mind, no one. There is not a scrap of evidence on that point. The unfortunate victim of the robbery believes that he can identify them as his assailants, and no doubt it is an honest belief on his part. But as Josefs Movinsky has told you in evidence, the poor man was dazed and bewildered. Was he in a state to identify anyone? He made a remarkable statement—a very remarkable statement—namely, that he saw the Bishop of Pimlico passing in his motor while he was lying on the road. Now the Crown has not put the bishop in the box to support this belief, and whether he went by or not, I ask you to consider whether a man lying half-stunned on the road could have recognized the Right Reverend gentleman as he passed in a motor. A strange delusion! Is it probable? Is it even possible?

No! I contend, and I think you will agree with me, that the evidence of identification is not satisfactory. . . .

[They were found guilty and got three years, Counsel failing to explain away the fact that they had pawned the victim's watch.]

5. GOOD ENGLISH

I daresay you have already guessed what it is.

Now for the story written in good English. It is a very old story, much older than the English, though that is old also. It runs thus :

A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. And by chance there came down a certain priest that way: and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side.

But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him, and went to him, and

bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, "Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee."

§ IX

Drunken Helots

THE COLLOQUIAL STYLE

ALL of these versions of the same tale will serve to show what not to do.

The story itself is a model of English.

Let us take them separately and study them a little to see their defects.

What the Cyclist said to the Reporter

“You want to know what happened last night. I’ll tell you. I was cycling down the Pimlico Road very late at night and I saw a chap lying by the side of the road. I jumped off and picked him up. He was half dazed and didn’t even know where he was. Then he began to pull himself together a bit: told me he had been attacked by some roughs and robbed: they must have hit him a pretty good whack over the head and left him half dead in the gutter. He told me that a couple of motors passed directly after, and that he called for help but they wouldn’t stop. He said he spotted the Bishop of Pimlico in one of ’em: seems to be a bit of a swell if he knows a bishop.

“After a bit he got better, and I found a cab and trundled him down to the Three Stars. I was in

a hurry, so I told the landlord there to look after him. Oh yes, I did pay the cab; couldn't leave the old boy in the lurch.

"Never saw a Bobby the whole time."

Observe things which must not be used in writing good English.

1. Abbreviations: "I'll", "didn't".
2. Slang words and colloquial phrases: "pull himself together", "chap", "spotted".
3. Omission of the subject: "Never saw a Bobby the whole time".
4. Ugly and careless repeating of the same phrase: "a bit".

Study him further, and you will see that he practically uses nothing but one kind of sentence: "I jumped off and picked him up", A + B. It is a good enough shape in its way, but in good English there should be a variety of sentences.

Learn then that you must not write in the clipped and shortened style in which you talk.

§ X

“*Journallese*”

Or, as Sir Quiller Couch calls it, “Jargon”

ALLEGED ROBBERY WITH VIOLENCE

While riding his bicycle between two and three o'clock yesterday morning along the unfrequented locality of the Pimlico Road, a young man of foreign extraction named Josefs Movinsky perceived the body of an individual stretched apparently motionless in the gutter. He alighted from his machine and discovered that the victim of the occurrence had been assaulted by some criminals, who, after relieving him of his watch and all his available cash, had made off undetected. The unfortunate victim, who appears to be well connected, has not yet been identified. He lies at present at the Three Stars Hotel in a critical condition whither his compassionate rescuer escorted him in a cab. Hopes are entertained of his ultimate recovery. The police are on the alert.

Plainly the Reporter is a man with a plague of long words

1. Count the words of three syllables or more used by the cyclist. . . . Now count the reporter. . . . He is a man who cannot call a spade a spade. Thus he puts “individual” for

“man”, “discovered” for “found”, and so on. He mistakes the using of long words for “fine writing”. Don’t make the same mistake yourself.

2. Again, many of his words are drawn from *Latin*. Where you have a choice, use Saxon words and not Latin ones. They are so much easier to understand for one thing, and they have more force.

Observe:

“Again, his terminology is principally derived from the Latin language. When in composition it is possible to make a selection, employ the Saxon alternatives and not their Latin synonyms. They are more comprehensible and make a profounder impression.”

There it is again, in Latin style. Which gets home best? Unluckily the second version looks more learned, and that leads some foolish people to write in this ponderous way.

3. The reporter uses a number of commonplace phrases: “unfortunate victim” is one, “available cash” is another. Find some more. The fact is he has seen “victims” described as “unfortunate” so often that he cannot think of one word without the other. He and his tribe are apt to call an oyster a “succulent bivalve”. This is a horrible fault; you will find more

about it on p. 80. For the present, remember that if you find a noun saying: "This is *my* adjective that I always walk in with", you are to answer: "Not in here, anyhow".

4. He begins with a roundabout sentence; and he has another disorderly one which the sub-editor certainly should have put right. Find it.

Learn from the reporter then to tell a plain tale plainly. But it is more difficult than it seems.

§ XI

The Moralizing or "Sermony" Style

The recent deplorable outrage on the Pimlico Road must not be allowed to pass without our drawing some lessons from it. Does it not bring home to us the terrible insecurity which pervades our life even in the twentieth century? That it should be possible for such an occurrence to take place on so frequented a highway is astonishing. It is surely time that some steps were taken for the better policing of this important thoroughfare, and we may confidently hope that the offenders will be detected and punished. The young man Josefs Movinsky is deserving of the highest praise; although we gather that he is not an Englishman, he has shown that ready compassion that unites the kind hearts of all nations. Indeed he went further, even assisting the sufferer at his own expense: his conduct indeed offers a lesson to some of our own young people who, we fear, might not have been equally ready to assist, and is an instructive comment upon the attitude of those who condemn unheard all alien immigration. We have the authority of the Right Reverend the Bishop of Pimlico's chauffeur for saying that he only saw what he took to be a drunken man sitting by the roadside.

[This is an extract from the *Parish Magazine* of St. Parabola's, Pimlico, and was probably written by the churchwarden who edits it.]

The object of the moralizer—and in the main of the preacher—is not only to state a view, but to *persuade you to agree with it or to learn something from it*. Remember that it is not the aim of an essay, which may state opinions of course as well as facts and may strive to convince, but does not aim point-blank at *persuasion* or *instruction*. Still less should it give *advice*.

1. He uses many words and phrases that express *praise* or *blame*: “deplorable” is the first; find the others.

2. He is constantly *associating himself with his reader*, e.g. “without our drawing some lessons from it”. But what he means is that *he* will draw some lessons for *you*. He wishes to *persuade* you to agree with him that he is right.

3. Having caught some of the marks of a sermon (a bad one), he has a sort of mildly argumentative tone. “It is surely time”, and you are expected to say: “Yes, high time!” Find other examples.

4. He also has a number of commonplace

phrases ("succulent bivalves"), which you can find. But that is because he writes ill; not because of his style.

Learn from the moralizer that you must not *preach, advise, persuade, or instruct.*

§ XII

The “ Oratorical ” or “ Speech ” Style

Now, gentlemen, let us examine this story. Let us look closely into it. It is said that the accused were on the Pimlico Road after midnight on that day, but no evidence is offered. Who saw them? No one, gentlemen. Bear that in mind, no one. There is not a scrap of evidence on that point. The unfortunate victim of this robbery believes that he can identify them as his assailants, and no doubt it is an honest belief on his part. But as Josefs Movinsky has told you in evidence, the poor man was dazed and bewildered. Was he in a state to identify anyone? He made a remarkable statement—a very remarkable statement—namely, that he saw the Bishop of Pimlico passing in his motor while he was lying on the road. Now the Crown has not put the bishop in the box to support this belief, and whether he went by or not, I ask you to consider whether a man lying half-stunned in the road could have recognized the Right Reverend gentleman as he passed in a motor. A strange delusion! Is it probable? Is it even possible? No! I contend, and I think you will agree with me, that the evidence of identification is not satisfactory. . . .

The orator wishes to persuade too, as did

the moralizer, but in a somewhat different way. He appeals more to the *reason* and the *intellect*; the moralizer's appeal is to the *feelings*, to a *sense of duty*, to *conscience*. The orator is continuously argumentative.

1. Thus the orator is constantly saying, "Please think!" His first phrase says it *twice* ("Now", "let us examine").

2. He asks a number of questions: some he answers himself, others he leaves the jurymen to answer. Such questions are called *rhetorical questions*, and you should avoid them in an essay. Your business is to state facts or opinions.¹

Observe that he sometimes asks a question where he really means to state a fact. "Is it probable? Is it possible?" He means that it is neither probable nor possible.

3. He uses imperatives freely: bids you "Bear this in mind."

4. He exclaims (find his exclamations).

5. He repeats things to make them impressive: "a remarkable statement—a very remarkable statement".

All these are tricks—rather cheap tricks—

¹ An advocate is not permitted to state his opinion: he merely puts the facts and suggests things for the jury to consider. An orator of course is free to state his opinions, but he also strives to convince by making his audience believe that they have already, as sensible men, come to the same conclusion that he has.

of the orator. But, being cheap tricks, they are just the things you are likely to pick up unless you are on your guard.

Learn from the orator that though you may advance arguments, you are not to do it in an argumentative way. You are to beware of *questions, imperatives, exclamations, and vain repetitions.*

Yes, you will find plenty of them in admirable essays, but they are not easy for a beginner to handle neatly.

§ XIII

Good English

A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. And by chance there came down a certain priest that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side.

But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him, and went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, "Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee".

Go over this *from the point of view of English* and see if you can find any of the faults or tricks which we have noticed in the others.

Notice that the words are short, and that few are drawn from Latin. Though it is so

brief it is dignified; it tells the whole story, and tells it with a force that no "fine writing" could rival. There is no need of "exclamation" or "rhetorical question"; there is not a word of praise or blame.

Notice once again with what directness it begins. Compare it with the reporter's clumsy start.

So then, you *have* a standard of good English if you will only use it. Everyone is familiar enough with the Gospels and the Psalms to know what sorts of words are to be met there: for example, returning to the reporter's "unfrequented locality", "individual", "available cash", we know that these would be out of place in the Gospels or Psalms, but "lonely place", "money", "man", could be found there.

§ XIV

On Using the English of the Bible

WHERE you are in doubt which of two words to choose, choose the one which you think would be more likely to be found in the Bible, e.g.:

Choose between "he took the necessary precautions" and "he was on his guard".

Choose between "employers and employees" and "masters and men".

Choose between "arrive on the scene with promptitude" and "come quickly".

Choose between "circulated an instruction" and "sent an order".

Choose between "refused to operate" and "would not work".

Perhaps you urge that the Good Samaritan is only a simple story. True, but the language of the Bible deals with high subjects too. Take this example of a great theme: Man's weakness and the might of his Creator, even over

earth and heaven. It is from the 102nd Psalm.

“But I said, O my God, take me not away in the midst of mine age; as for Thy years, they endure throughout all generations. Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundations of the Earth, and the heavens are the work of Thy hands. They shall perish but Thou shalt endure; they all shall wax old as doth a garment, and as a vesture shalt Thou change them, and they shall be changed. But Thou art the same and Thy years shall not fail.”

Or, if you want another example, take the 38th chapter of Job, or the 15th chapter of the 1st Epistle to Corinthians (which you will get to know better as time goes on), and see if the subject loses aught because the language is simple.

§ XV

The English of the Bible

THEN I am to imitate the Bible?"

Indeed you are not. The old-fashioned turns of speech, the second person singular, words which have gone out of use, and so on—things which we call “archaisms”—are exactly what you are not to copy. What you are to do is *to use the language of to-day, for the best of that is still the language of the Bible, using your knowledge of the Bible to enable you to sort bad from good.* If you were as well acquainted with Shakespeare as you are with the Bible I could say “use the English of Shakespeare”. But few boys know much of Shakespeare, while they hear the Bible constantly. Still, if you did know Shakespeare well, you would find that though the language he uses is often more ornamented than that of the Bible (and so harder to understand), yet in his greatest passages he is generally most simple.

So he makes Wolsey—who was of all men

in England most hedged round with pomp—
speak thus:

“Cromwell, I did not think to shed a tear
In all my miseries, but thou hast forced me
Out of thine honest truth to play the woman.
Let's dry our eyes; and thus far hear me, Cromwell,
And—when I am forgotten as I shall be
And sleep in dull cold marble where no mention
Of me more must be heard of, say I taught thee,
Say, Wolsey, that once trod the ways of glory
And sounded all the depths and shoals of honour,
Found thee a way out of his wreck to rise in;
A sure and safe one, though thy master missed it.
Mark but my fall and that that ruined me.
Cromwell, I charge thee fling away ambition;
By that sin fell the angels; how can man then,
The image of his Maker, hope to win by it?
Love thyself last; cherish those hearts that hate thee;
Corruption wins not more than honesty.
Still in thy right hand carry gentle peace
To silence envious tongues. Be just and fear not;
Let all the ends thou aim'st at be thy country's,
Thy God's, and truth's; then if thou fallest, O Crom-
well,
Thou fallest a blessed martyr.”

Or, again, look at Henry V's speech before
Agincourt, when Westmoreland wishes for more
men:

“What's he that wishes so?
My cousin Westmoreland? No, my fair cousin:
If we are marked to die, we are enow
To do our country loss; and if to live,
The fewer men, the greater share of honour.

God's will! I pray thee, wish not one man more.
By Jove, I am not covetous for gold,
Nor care I who doth feed upon my cost;
It yearns me not, if men my garments wear;
Such outward things dwell not in my desires.
But, if it be a sin to covet honour,
I am the most offending soul alive.
No, faith, my coz, wish not a man from England!
God's peace! I would not lose so great an honour,
As one man more, methinks, would share from me,
For the best hope I have. O, do not wish one more!
Rather proclaim it, Westmoreland, through my host,
That he, which hath no stomach to this fight,
Let him depart; his passport shall be made
And crowns for convoy put into his purse.
We would not die in that man's company
That fears his fellowship to die with us.
This day is called the feast of Crispian.
He that outlives this day, and comes safe home,
Will stand a tip-toe when this day is named,
And rouse him at the name of Crispian.
He that shall live this day, and see old age,
Will yearly on the vigil feast his friends,
And say 'To-morrow is Saint Crispian'.
Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars,
And say 'These wounds I had on Crispin's day'.
Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot,
But he'll remember with advantages
What feats he did that day. Then shall our names,
Familiar in his mouth as household words,
Harry the King, Bedford and Exeter,
Warwick and Talbot, Salisbury and Gloucester,
Be in their flowing cups freshly remembered.
This story shall the good man teach his son;
And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by,
From this day to the ending of the world,

But we in it shall be remembered:
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition.
And gentlemen in England, now a-bed,
Shall think themselves accursed they were not here;
And hold their manhoods cheap, whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day."

And on another 25th day of October, some four centuries and a half later, the "happy few, the band of brothers" showed England that the same spirit was yet alive in her sons.

§ XVI

The Writing of Good English

ONE word more on the "Writing of Good English" before we get to exploring the pitfalls into which you will tumble.

You are to call a spade "a spade".

That is to say, do not go hunting about for other words for the same thing (commonly called "synonyms"), for in nine cases out of ten they are not synonyms at all. To take a familiar example, "a spade" is neither "a shovel", nor is it sufficiently described by calling it "an agricultural implement". So if you have to write about "flowers", or "war", or "mercy", or "culture", do not be upset if these words come over and over again. Variety in the *shape* of sentence is needful; so is variety in words *when you can get it*. But never shrink from using the same word over and over again when it is the right word.

Once more, your business is to tell a plain tale plainly.

A Frenchman once said—and none are more sparing of words or use them more deftly than the best French writers—“It is no defence to say that words *can* mean what you intend; they must not be able to mean anything else”.

PART II

On Pitfalls

§ 1

On Beginning

Scholar. I am all impatience to begin, that I may try to put in practice what I have learnt.

Dominie. Begin then.

Scholar. On what subject?

Dominie. Anything will do: let us say "Flowers".

Scholar. Good; I will assume that I have gathered the Heap and sorted it into a Plan as you have suggested. I take a piece of paper, write "Flowers" at the top (and my name), and begin thus—

"From earliest days these have won the universal admiration of mankind. If we examine the oldest literature in the world we find that they are often . . . "

Dominie. Stop!

Scholar. You have not let me go far. You might give me a chance, after all the talking you have done.

Dominie. I am sorry. But you began with "From earliest days these have won". I am forced to ask you *what* have won?

Scholar. Flowers of course!

Dominie. You have not said so.

Scholar. Yes I have: on the top.

Dominie. True. But let me tell you that the word *these* is intended to point to something already mentioned. Pedantic grammarians, you well know, call it a Demonstrative Pronoun, that is to say *a pronoun which points*. You have set it there with nothing for it to point at. Your essay should tell us in its first sentence, or at any rate speedily, what you are writing about.

Observe, then, this—when you have written your first two or three sentences, *cover up the subject at the top*, and read what you have written. If it does not mention your subject, or at any rate lead up to a mention of it, you have begun ill.

Scholar. I see. I will begin then "From earliest days flowers have won . . ."

Dominie. That makes it clear.

§ II

On Beginning

Scholar. "From earliest days flowers have won the universal admiration of mankind. When we examine the oldest literature in the world we find mention of them. There are the 'rose of Sharon', the 'lilies of the field', which even Solomon could not rival, the 'almond tree' which flourished, and 'Jonah's gourd' which is probably wrongly identified with the castor-oil tree. The word *ἄνθος*, in Greek, means a flower, and from it is derived our word *anthology*, signifying the flowers of literature; while Ovid in his *Fasti* relates how Tarquin mowed off the heads of the lilies with his stick, and discourses of the odorous bouquet gathered by the fair but luckless Proserpine (Persephone). 'Pictaque dissimili flore nitebat humus.' . . . "

How do you like that?

Dominie. Not much.

Scholar. Dear me! I thought it excellent.

Dominie. Doubtless; but it is so false. You

say: "When we examine the oldest literature in the world". But have you examined it? Again, your examples are—shall we say—ordinary. They give the appearance of learning without the reality. You have set to work to split the ears of the groundlings.

Again, if you begin so far back, you will hardly get to what is the real subject, namely, what *you* think about flowers. Your essay will be like the tadpole: a huge head and no body. You lead us to imagine that you are going to write an exhaustive treatise on flowers from the beginning of the world to the present time, in the manner of the Encyclopædia.

Perhaps you suppose that it gives an idea of thoroughness to go back so far. You are like the women in the colleges at Cambridge, of whom examiners used to say that, no matter what the question, they always began with the Flood. Of course that was long ago. Doubtless they know better now. Such random excursions into the past do not denote thoroughness, but a *lack of the sense of proportion*.

Write about flowers as you know them.

Scholar. I will begin again. "Flowers are Nature's daintiest gift to man."

Dominie. That is better.

§ III

On Diving In

BEGINNERS always find it hard to begin. They wish to approach their subject gradually and cautiously by roundabout sentences, lest they should scare it. That is perhaps well enough if you are going to write an essay of the length of Macaulay's—some fifty or sixty pages. Then you have time to beat about the bush before you start your game. But when your purpose is to write a short essay you have no time to waste. So imitate the courageous bather and *dive in*.

“A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho.”

Notice that it does not pause to tell us that he was a Jew, that he had money and was well-dressed, or that the road was lonely: all this comes out in the story.

Some of the most celebrated essays in English begin in this head-first way. Thus Bacon's Essay on Truth—

“‘What is truth?’ said jesting Pilate; and would not stay for an answer”.

Or, again, On Revenge—

“Revenge is a kind of wild justice”.

Or, again, his Essay on Gardens—

“God Almighty first planted a garden”.

And if you allege that in two of these cases the writer goes far back for his beginning, notice that he does not linger in the past. The Essay on Gardens continues: “And, indeed, it is the purest of human pleasures”. Remark, in other words, that after his dive he comes to the surface at once, and we see where he is going.

On the other hand, the beginner dives in sometimes with excellent intentions but little skill. Either he achieves what is vulgarly called a “belly-flopper”, making hideous commotion and splash, or he goes so far under water that onlookers cannot make out what has become of the fellow. He begins with a long sentence, which may or may not be clumsy, but is at any rate so protracted that the mind is weary of the essay before the writer reaches his first full-stop. This is a bad habit. An essay should begin crisply and neatly.

You will not match the neatness of Bacon's beginnings, nor will you, perhaps, win the cup for headers. None the less dive in. Don't crawl in, one foot at a time; and don't sprawl in.

§ IV

Mental Processes

YOUR essay is *what you think* about any subject. It is plainly wrong to say: "I think" in the essay, because it is *all* what you think—except where you say that it is not.

Yet many essays are half made up of *mental processes*: roundabout ways of saying "I think". Your business is to present the results of your thought, and (mostly) to omit the methods or processes by which you got the results.

This is a portion of what my friend Master Thomas Bunker wrote about the Troubles in the Balkans, before war had actually broken out.

"Now, when we consider the circumstances under which any war in the Balkans is likely to be fought, we find that it will probably be marked by peculiar ferocity. This is because there is a hostility of race as well as a difference of creed. The reason why various Christian states will fight is because they desire the liberation of the Macedonians from the barbarity and oppression of the Turks. For it is the case that,

wherever the Turks have the government of Christian subjects, they display a callous brutality and an indifference to the sufferings of a downtrodden population. It is well known that little faith can be placed in Turkish promises of reform, and therefore her opponents may at any moment decide to have recourse to the arbitrament of the sword."

He says "I think" five times in his first sentence. Thus—

"Now, when I think how I think war in the Balkans will, I think, be fought, I think that it will, I think, be marked by peculiar ferocity".

But as it is *his* essay, we take for granted that it is all what he thinks, and so we can cut him down to—

"War in the Balkans is likely to be marked by peculiar ferocity" (we give him one "I think").¹

Prune the rest of him. You will find plenty to cut.

Another product of the cowardly mind is the desire to *qualify*. The writer is really thinking of two things at once: "It is, and yet it is not",

¹ Here is another illustration, drawn from another essay of Master Bunker's. He observed "*Perhaps, at first sight, it may seem likely* that such a course of action might be as successful in the case of a strike in this country as in South Africa". What he really says is this: "Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps, perhaps such a course of action might be as successful, &c.". Cautious fellow; "perhaps" he is not wrong!

is his mental attitude. So he produces something of this kind—

For it is scarcely too much to say that, except in rare cases, the Turks, when they try to govern Christian races, display little less than an almost savage brutality. Noble and honest Pashas, no doubt, there may have been; but the majority at least, to speak strict truth, are all but indifferent to the sufferings of these populations.

[Count how many times he qualifies his general statement, which is that the Turks misgovern Christian races.]

Beware of saying the same thing over and over again. Beware also of writing down things that merely show *mental processes*, especially when they are only the processes of rummaging in your mind.¹ If you are engaged in deep original thought, that is another matter; but then you will require no advice on essay-writing.

¹ Here are a couple of examples of *mental processes*, also from Master Thomas Bunker: (1) "Going on to the question of considering the next point, we find that . . ." (2) "This subject is one on which we shall find that much may be said on both sides."

§ V

On Connecting-Strings: Particularly Conjunctions

YOU must credit your reader with some intelligence. Observe Master Bunker once more.

“Any war in the Balkans will probably be marked by peculiar ferocity. This is because there is a hostility of race as well as a difference of creed. . . .”

You have already pruned “*this is*”; you can take out the “because” also. The order says that it is *because*. Similarly, in the next sentence we can do without *The reason why*. It is obvious without it.

This habit of putting in “because”, “therefore”, “since”, “consequently”, and so on, in places where they are not needed, comes from two things. Boys are taught that in Latin prose they must put in connecting-links of this kind. It is the Latin custom or idiom. But it is not the English idiom. Again, their other model of reasoning is Euclid or some

modern dilution of that sage: hence everything has to go down with a *because* or *therefore*. This may be excellent logic, but it makes stiff ungainly English. The *order* of your ideas should supply the place of most of these.

Notice, too, another mistake of Master Bunker's. He began his paragraph: "Now, when we consider . . ." This use of "now" to start a paragraph is common with beginners, and (commonly) wrong. "Now" is the speaker's device. It is his way of telling you he has got to the end of one aspect of his subject, and is going to begin another; and as you cannot *see* the paragraphs in his mind, he says "now" to call your attention to something fresh. But in writing, the *paragraph* itself tells you; so omit the "now" (which, strictly speaking, means "at this moment").

Again with our friends, *first*,¹ *secondly*, *thirdly*, *fourthly*, and so on. It may sometimes be necessary to stress *first* as opposed to *second* and *third*: then good and well. But in most cases the fact that you put a thing *first* shows that it is first, that the next comes after it proves that it is second, and that another comes last of three says *thirdly*. Credit your reader with some intelligence.

¹ *Firstly* is not often found in good company.

“He will assume, first, that you are doing your best; secondly, that you have some sense; and, thirdly, he will be gratified to find that you assume the same of him.”

Not one of these aggressive numerals is needed.

“He will assume that you are doing your best and that you have some sense; and he will be gratified to find that you assume the same of him.”

Observe, then, that in English *you do not need to tie every sentence to its neighbour*. You may leave the reader's mind to supply most of these connecting-strings, provided that *you take pains with your order*.

§ VI

On Abstracts

THE SLOUGH OF DESPOND

ENGLISH is full of *Abstract Nouns*: nouns that indicate ideas, things that we can neither touch nor see. It is not possible to get rid of them all—many of them are useful and necessary words—but most beginners are beset with hordes of them.

“Now, when we consider the circumstances under which any war in the Balkans is likely to be fought, we find that it will probably be marked by peculiar ferocity. This is because there is a hostility of race as well as a difference of creed. The reason why various Christian states will fight is because they desire the liberation of the Macedonians from the barbarity and oppression of the Turks. For it is the case that, wherever the Turks have the government of Christian subjects, they display a callous brutality and an indifference to the sufferings of a downtrodden population. It is well known that little faith can be placed in Turkish promises of reform, and therefore her opponents may at any moment decide to have recourse to the arbitrament of the sword.”

Count them here. There are far too many.

Abstracts are tiresome for many reasons. To begin with, they are mostly drawn from Latin or Greek, and you have already seen that good English rests mainly on the Saxon words. Then they are stupid, dull. They say little, and they are so long.

"They desire the liberation of the Macedonians from the barbarity and oppression of the Turks. . . . The Turks display a callous brutality and an indifference to the sufferings of a downtrodden population."

Prave 'orts, doubtless. But Byron wrote:

And musing there an hour alone
I dreamt that Greece might yet *be free*.

Again, *barbarity, oppression, brutality, indifference*, really tell us nothing about what the Turks do. If you were telling a story, do you think you would interest your hearers by such words? Not at all: you would give examples. You would say that the Turks illtreat the Macedonians, beat them, plunder them, burn their houses, and sometimes cut their throats. You would go on to say that the Turks are callous and brutal; they do not care about the people they rule; they have no mercy on man, woman, or child. (Unless, of course, your sympathies go with the Turks, and then you will say that the Macedonians are really very well governed.)

Be on the watch for abstract nouns, and kill many of them. You can generally use *verbs* or *adjectives* in their place: doing this will make you think exactly what you do mean instead of hiding your meaning behind an *-ation*, an *-ity*, or an *-ism*.

Of course there are dozens of splendid abstracts—some of the finest words in English are abstracts—*War*, *pity*, *faith*, *hope*, *charity*, *mercy*, *courage*, *truth*, *evil*. But there are hordes of long-winded imitators; you will find them clinging in your pen like the long hairs in the post-office ink. Clean them out.

Remember, a *verb* or an *adjective* will usually replace them.

§ VII

Wolf! Wolf!

ON ADJECTIVES; AND ON "VERY"

SOME beginners usher in every noun with an adjective clinging to it, like the men and women going down arm-in-arm to dinner.

Plumping himself down in his capacious arm-chair beside a cosy fire he lighted a fragrant cigar, and pouring himself out a moderate jorum of his usual whisky he abandoned himself to the sweet solace of his accustomed forty winks.

It is hard to say that any of these adjectives are really wanted. Being "his" arm-chair it is presumably "capacious": no man plumps himself down in an arm-chair which is two sizes too small. Fires are commonly "cosy", and if cigars are not "fragrant" we buy another kind. Perhaps it is important to say that the jorum was "moderate", but no one drinks his "unusual" whisky. Solaces are, of course, "sweet", and the familiar phrase "forty winks" implies that it was a habit.

Still, if you take them all out it may appear bald. Leave one here and there.

Nothing calls for so much pains as the choice of adjectives. To begin with, you will have to decide whether an adjective is needed at all.

“The rank is but the guinea-stamp,
The man’s the gowd for a’ that.”

No adjective could make “man” more forcible, and, while you are about it, just note the dignity of the word *man* here, and in the line

“A man’s a man for a’ that,”

and consider the latter thus remodelled:

“An individual’s a person for a’ that.”¹

If, however, an adjective be needed, different pitfalls await you.

You may choose a lazy adjective, i.e. one that merely is a sort of stopgap. *Great* is (often) such an adjective. Thus, if you are not on your guard, writing say of some mountain pass, you will be speaking of the “*great mountains, great snow-fields with great avalanches, great precipices, and great forests, and great clouds overhead; great waterfalls and great pools* from which

¹ “Man” and “woman” are good words; so are “gentleman” and “lady” in their proper sense, though they have been much soiled by misuse: “individual”, “person”, “human being”, are indifferent substitutes; but boys are curiously fond of them, though they rightly resent being described, themselves, as “juveniles”, or “young persons”.

great quantities of salmon are taken", and so on. Of course you will not put them all in a string like this; they will be scattered. But it is a lazy mind which cannot see any more fitting epithet to describe a thing with than "very big". Reduce it to talk, and you will see how idiotic it is.

"Tell me about the mountains you saw."

"They were very big."

"And the snow-fields."

"They were very big."

"And the avalanches."

"Oh, they were very big, too!" and so on. Edifying conversation, is it not? You will remember that the navvy also uses only one epithet, and so imparts a certain sameness to his talk. Search for more appropriate adjectives and you will find them.

"Great", of course, has a meaning. "He was a great man" says something which we cannot well say otherwise; but it does not mean that he was very big.

Even worse than the pitfall of mental laziness is the pitfall of Exaggeration. *Great*, of course, is nowhere: in rush the *Megatheriums*, *Unparalleled*, *Unprecedented*, *Stupendous*, and Co. This is the mood in which tea in the garden becomes, to a Frenchwoman, *ravissant*, and

causes a German to describe good beer as *kolossal*.

Large words, like other great beasts, have their uses, but they must not be allowed to career over homely pastures. Keep them till they are needed. You cannot really put an Ox into a Teacup; there is no room for him.

It is this same habit of exaggeration that leads to the constant use of *very*. The writer is not content to say "he was a brave man", but thinks to make it stronger by adding "very". In nine cases out of ten *very* does not strengthen an epithet or adjective: it only weakens it by distracting attention from it.

Milton's *Lycidas* is often taken as an example of skill in the use of adjective and adverb. You will not find *very* in it—nor in its comrades *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*; and in each of them *great* occurs only once. Again, Macaulay is a writer who does not spare "colour", who writes, as we say, vividly; but you will not find *very* in his account of the Black Hole of Calcutta. De Quincey's *Vision of Sudden Death*, and the *Dream Fugue* which follows it, have but one *very* in some seven hundred lines¹ of intense feeling, and that one used with a noun "the very anarchy".

¹I do not include the beginning of the *Vision*.

Very (the adverb) means "truly". Think now: when a man, relating a marvellous tale, keeps on saying: "It's the truth, Guv'nor—true as I'm a-standin' 'ere," do we believe him the more or less?

"Do not use *very*—except on very rare occasions," said the Professor.

§ VIII

On "Succulent Bivalves"

"It subsequently transpired that a succulent bivalve was concealed in the immediate vicinity of the baronial hall. A threatening mob collected and made several ugly rushes, but the Metropolitan police were quickly in evidence and effected a speedy rescue of the *piece de resistance*." [Memoirs of Penialinus.]

THIS, you remember, is what the Bad Journalist called the Oyster. I use the term to denote the tribe of commonplace phrases, the "arm-in-arm" companions which go about together, and the hackneyed quotations. Luckless creatures these last, torn from their king's houses and led into captivity; poor degraded slaves, you will find them in the gutters of English—ill-used, pathetic, and bedraggled, yet with remnants of their dignity still clinging to them. "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever." So wrote Keats; but all joy has left that hapless line. "On the light fantastic toe" comes dancing by, but with the steps of the music hall. "A ministering angel thou . . ."; yes, once

upon a time. But she and another poor lady lack that repose "which stamps the caste of Vere de Vere". Let these poor things be; they are at every man's "beck and call". Don't you drag them, shrinking and ashamed, into the light.¹

These "succulent bivalves" are of many sorts, some more and some less nauseous. "It subsequently transpired" that "the iron had entered into his soul"; he "drained the cup of failure to the dregs", or, "intoxicated with success" in his "coign of vantage", he pursued "the even tenor of his way"—these are altogether become abominable.² Others are merely soiled and mouldy—ready-made phrases such as "appointed destination", "disastrous failure", "earnest solicitations", "immediate necessities", "the discomfort of the situation", and so on. Of course you will find these and their like (sometimes) in good company. All the same, try to use these reach-me-down suits as little as you can.

Scholar. But how am I to tell them?

Dominie. It is difficult. Yet you will learn

¹ Yet—and this is for teachers—one must remember that quotations which we know as stale are new (once) to everyone, and that a boy coming freshly to one of these will feel its beauty without knowing its misfortunes. So he cannot be blamed for using it.

² Though some were well-born.

to know them the more you read and the more you write, if you will be on the look-out for them. When a turn of speech rushes into your pen, crying: "Here you are; everyone uses Me: you can't want anything better", reply to it: "No, thank you."

Have you ever seen an old bone lying in the road? Watch and you will see every dog that comes along run to it, smell it, pick it up, chew it for a moment, and then drop it for the next comer. Well, that muddy, numbled bone is your "ready-made phrase"—your "succulent bivalve". "Is thy servant a dog that he should do this thing?"

§ IX

Some Common Mistakes

1. Split infinitives: that is, separating the "to" from its infinitive by an adverb.

"The Professor proceeded to carefully explain what a split infinitive was."

2. Ending a sentence with a preposition.

"Do not use a preposition to end up with," said the Professor.¹

3. Using French, German, or Italian words and phrases. There are equivalents for them in English, and scraps of foreign tongues lend an air of affectation—a parade of cheap knowledge. Besides, in many cases we use the French wrong. Thus, to take the commonest case, no Frenchman ever says *encore* when he wishes a performance repeated; *morale* is neither French nor English.

4. Using abbreviations such as *i.e.*, *viz.*, *etc.*

¹ All the same it is not very wicked; the "Genius of the Language" often adopts it, and it would be absurd to object to such an ending as "something to beware of".

There are English words and phrases for these scraps of Latin; and often *etc.* means no more than "I cannot think of any other examples, but I wish to make my reader think that I have a number more in my head".

5. American spelling and phrasing: "humor", "center", "endeavor", and the rest of them; "sidewalks", "boarded" the train, "baggage" (for luggage), and so on.

Our friend the bad journalist is sometimes ready to use these.

§ X

On Ways into the Head

Dominie. When you have finished writing your essay, the next thing to do is to read it through.

Scholar. Of course! I always do.

Dominie. Aloud?

Scholar. Er—no!

Dominie. What has Heaven given you ears for?

There are two ways into your brain, and far the easier road is by the ears. Children learn to talk by imitation of sounds long before they know the letters that represent them. They enjoy stories before they can read them. They learn to sing, and to like music, before they come to the tiresome business of learning their notes. Writing after all only represents sounds, and it is by its sound that it is most easily judged.

Of course we are so used to trusting our eyes that we are apt to neglect our ears: in conse-

quence they are not nearly as good as they should be.¹ The eyes can do the work if they are well enough trained. A good musician will enjoy reading the score of an opera almost as much as hearing it performed: he will detect a wrong note by eye as certainly as he would by ear. But with the ordinary boy the eye is apt to travel too fast; it overlooks things which the more leisurely tongue and ear will catch.

Therefore test your essay by reading it *aloud*. You need not have any audience beside yourself. But read slowly and carefully; read it so as to make the best of it. If you, the writer, cannot find it pleasing, depend on it no one else can.

When you read—

1. You should catch all the omissions. Words are apt to be left out by a mind that is running in advance of the pen. For example, if you leave out a “not” it makes a deal of difference. Sometimes a sentence will be left incomplete—without a verb; or a singular subject goes and commits polygamy with a plural

¹ Dogs and wild animals, who have not trained their eyes to the same extent that man has, trust far more to other senses. Their hearing is quicker, and they rely most of all on the sense of scent which civilized man has lost. Savages have kept it, though: an African native will sort the clothes sent back from the wash by smelling them.

verb; or some other irregularity occurs. These your ear should detect.

2. You will be able to correct the stops. A sentence or phrase that is too long to read comfortably in an ordinary breath has something wrong with it. It needs altering, or the adding of commas, or breaking up with a semicolon. Where the voice wants a pause, the text wants a stop.

3. You will catch tricks of style: you will hear whether your sentences are all too long, or all too short, or whether they are monotonously similar; whether too many of them begin alike, or end alike. What we want is variety.

§ XI

Of Sentences; and of Variety

YOU have been bored often enough with sentences as grammars class them—the Principal sentence; the horde of Subordinate sentences and clauses with polyglot names—adverbial, adjectival, temporal, consecutive, final, concessive, and so forth—all essential for the right construction of Latin and Greek Prose. I want to present another view of them.

The simplest form is the “Principal” Sentence—Subject, Verb, Object (SVO).

But a succession of SVO's would speedily become intolerable. Thus we can put two together, joining them with an *and*: SVO and SVO or A + B.

This, observe, is the unskilful writer's first device for variety, and it leads into the commonest pitfall. In some form or another the shape is apt to recur and recur. Of course there is nothing wrong in the form of sentence; it is only the constant repeating of it that be-

comes tiresome. See, then, that you are not in the habit of saying $A + B$, $A + B$, $A + B$ time after time.

Don't write too many coupled sentences.

There are other tricks with *ands*.

There is the outpouring habit. The writer is not content with $A + B$, but goes on and adds other principal sentences, $C + D + E$, till he fills a page with a sort of boa-constrictor of a sentence, coil on coil, and the tail of it not yet in sight. Of course that is horrible. Long sentences are not necessarily bad—indeed, they are often admirable—but they are not to be joined up in this way.

Don't string "ands": "He was magnificent, affable, and loquacious, and succeeded by his son, Adolphus the Fifth."

Two things here: the second "and" joins together two sentences that have no business to be joined. Think why.

Again, the massing of three adjectives is apt to become a trick. Some writers never seem to be content with less than three. Why three? Oliver Wendell Holmes says that the longing for three comes from the fact that human things are in three dimensions. They have length, breadth, and height. This triplicating of adjectives is well enough in its way.

Don't become a slave to the "three-adjective" habit.

Remark, again, that it is not needful always to put the subject first. Of course first is its normal place, but it will be monotonous if it always comes there.

1. "The leaves rustle when the wind blows in the forest." There's the normal order.

Try in how many ways you can re-arrange this.

2. "When the wind blows in the forest the leaves rustle."
3. "In the forest, when the wind blows, the leaves rustle."
4. "When, in the forest, the wind blows, the leaves rustle."
5. "The leaves, when the wind blows in the forest, rustle."
6. "In the forest the leaves rustle when the wind blows."

There's plenty of variety, you see.

Yes, it is true that all these orders don't mean quite the same thing. That is because now one thing and now another gets the emphasis thrown on it.

1. The whole sentence is colourless.
- 2 lays stress on the wind blowing in the forest.
- 3 stresses "forest" strongly and "the rustle of the leaves".
- 4 stresses "the rustle of the leaves".
- 5 (a clumsy form) stresses "leaves".
- 6 stresses "in the forest".

What's that you say? You don't agree with some of these? We have no time to argue; yet, now that I read them again, I don't feel altogether sure. Still we *have* got some variety in form, anyhow.

Therefore, don't *always* begin with the subject.

Don't *always* put the principal sentence first.

True, all these things are obvious enough when pointed out, but they are curiously invisible to the writer. Doubtless by this time you are ready to point out to me my tricks. Instead of doing that, listen.

Once upon a time a distinguished author wrote an immense book in twelve volumes. It is an English classic. Yet through it all there runs one persistent habit in the framing of sentences. Take down any volume of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*,

open it at random, and read a few sentences. Then see if you can detect the habit.

But don't make the mistake of thinking that Gibbon did not write well.

PART III

Of Merits

ONE merit is to make the thing the proper shape: that is to say, that it shall look like an essay at the first glance, properly divided into paragraphs and so on.

Another is to avoid defects, to keep out of common pitfalls: that means a choice of reasonably good English and the managing of stops and sentences fairly well.

But there are two other greater merits, much more difficult to acquire and more difficult still to teach. These are—

1. To have something to say.
2. To say it neatly.

Here you ought to get individual help from your teacher. Pester him to go over your essays with you alone, if you really wish to learn. He will probably be flattered into saying "Yes" if you ask nicely. Still, in case he won't, let's see what may be put on paper.

§ I

On Having Something to Say

Scholar. Well, but there's heaps to say on an easy subject.

Dominie. Of course there is. The thing is to choose the right heap. You must choose something which *you know well and like*, otherwise your heart will not be in it, and you will write what is called "padding". Again, if you happen to be able to choose what other people who are doing the same essay are not likely to know about, you will get a little distinction from the rest. Remember, you are not doing the essay alone; others are doing it too. You want yours to be one of the best.

Let's take an actual example. The subject set to a form of twenty-five boys was *A Railway Station*. Easy, of course: every one knows all about railway stations. See now what happened.

§ II

On Seeing

[And, if you can possibly stay your curiosity for a moment, just pause and think first what you would have written on the matter.

.
You have thought? Good; kindly bear it in mind.]

Three boys were lucky. One had travelled by the Siberian express, and he wrote about a Siberian way-side station. That could hardly fail to be interesting. Another wrote about Penaars River Station in the Transvaal, and knew it well—all the local flowers, and the habits of Kaffir porters, and so on. That, of course, was good. A third wrote a delightful description of Ventimiglia, the frontier station between France and Italy on the Riviera. Still, he was a good hand at it, and would have written well of almost any railway station.

These three were lucky in having knowledge of out-of-the-way things. Now for the rest,

who presumably all started fair, with only such knowledge of railway stations as any of us have.

One wrote of a Sussex way-side station whither he was forced to make his way owing to the break-down of his motor-cycle. During the ample leisure of waiting for the next train he had time to study the ways of the station-master and porter (same official), to watch all there was to be seen, and to see the humour of it. When you were reading his essay you felt you were in his shoes, with a sulky motor cycle for company, on a deserted platform, in the middle of a sweltering August afternoon. He did well.

Another wrote of Glynde, which is a small station on the Southern Railway. Obviously he knew it intimately, because the description was photographic in its minuteness. But, like the photograph, it had no character; there was nothing to show why he had written about it, and little to convey what the writer was like, or what he felt. So, although he was individual, he did only fairly well.

Another chose a junction in Wales, and wrote interestingly of the *train bach*, which means "little train", and of the Welsh folk who filled it. Another chose some other station on

the Cambrian railway (I forget its name), but plainly was fond of it, and wrote of it in a friendly way. One more did a picture of a sea-side station, near Belfast, to which he used to be taken as a child. He, too, had some pleasant memories, though he missed a good many chances. These were all "good" to "fair". Each, you see, gave some idea of the writer's habits and likings. Each was, in a word, "characteristic".

Scholar. You would be rather tedious if you were going over the whole twenty-five.

Dominie. That is so. I was. We will break off here, and you shall tell me what you thought of doing on the same subject. Some "great London terminus", eh?

Scholar (Stiffly). I trust I should know better than to choose so hackneyed a subject.

Dominie. Some of mine were not so wise. They maundered of "ceaseless processions of passengers", of crowded carriages in which with difficulty they "duly secured seats", of "perspiring porters", of "mountains of baggage", of the "harassed officials and the responsibilities of the signalmen". One or two even moralized on the "journey of life", and so on. Yet, all the same, one might write as

good an essay on, say, St. Pancras as on any other railway station. But I am interrupting you.

Scholar. I chose Crewe, which I happen to know well.

Dominie. When?

Scholar. Why "when"? Surely Crewe station doesn't change much?

Dominie. Doesn't it? Was it by night or by day?

Scholar. Oh, by day! You can't see so much at night.

Dominie. True; but perhaps you can imagine more. Which platform were you on?

Scholar. Does *that* matter?

Dominie. Of course it matters! On your platform hangs your destination; on your destination your frame of mind. You implied just now that Crewe doesn't change much. I tell you, it and every other station changes with the eyes which look at it. You like it or dislike it according to what it suggests to your mind. I love St. Pancras—the departure platform, that is to say; but the arrival platform is a different thing. Come now, think of the station where your school is. Surely the question of the platform matters.

Scholar. I see.

Dominie. Good! What sort of weather was it at Crewe?

Scholar. It was raining, and the trains were all shiny.

Dominie. I'm glad you noticed that. Which way was the rain falling?

Scholar. Oh, I say—I can't think how that matters!

Dominie. Think again then. If the raindrops were falling straight, it was calm. If they were slanting, then it was windy.

Scholar. And, of course, the steam is quite different when there is a wind to blow it about.

Dominie. Precisely!

Scholar. But am I to put all this in?

Dominie. Not necessarily. But unless you have a clear picture in your mind you cannot make anyone else see it. Each touch of accurate detail *makes your reader see with your eyes*, and that is what you want him to do.

Scholar. But if I look at everything, I see such a lot.

Dominie. There comes in the art of choosing.

§ III

On the Art of Choosing

PERHAPS you may have noticed that some of the subjects set for practice in making heaps and sorting these into paragraphs were of great size. If you had recourse to your old friend, the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, you would have found almost as much about “flowers” and “forests” as you did about “reptiles”. Each of your paragraphs might be made into an essay by itself. To beginners—whose difficulty so often is “I don’t know what to say”—this setting of big subjects is excusable. When you get on a little you will find that people commonly narrow down these subjects, and, instead of confronting you with “Flowers” or “Forests”, set, for example, “Wild Flowers”, or “Your Favourite Flowers”, or “Flowers as National Emblems”, or “A Wet Day in the Woods”, or “On Beech-woods”, or something of the sort. This somewhat restricts your choice.

Yet, however much a subject be narrowed down, there is always room for observation and fancy, if you encourage your mind to work. Think of all the marvellous patterns which musicians have woven out of twelve notes on a piano. Ideas and words have far greater variety than a piano. The puzzle is not that people manage to be original, but that they can achieve being humdrum.

Now, apply this to your railway-station theme. As you say, you see such a lot. Choose wisely. There are all sorts of lines of thought—far more even than the lines at Crewe.

First of all, it is *a* railway station, a particular one; not railway stations in general. Choose, then, one that is not like the rest. No; I repeat they are not all alike. Your mind will pick out one or two from the ruck. The ruck, it is true, are alike, because they have no clear message to your mind. It is they that contain the “average passenger”, the “perspiring porter”, “the incessant *va et vient* of humanity”, and so on—the scenes some newspapers describe (for lack of something better to write about) on the eve of the August Bank Holiday.

Of course it occurs to you that a great station is “a marvel of organization”; but as you probably do not know how it is organized, nor

by whom, nor even whether the station-master touches his hat to the deputy superintendent, or whether he calls him "'Enery", or which officials reckon their salary in pounds a year, and which in "bob a week", or which deals with what, your conjectures are not likely to be interesting. Again, you may enlarge upon the responsibility of this man and that, the "crying need that each should be paid a fair wage for a fair day's work"—whatever that may be—and let loose a flood of cheap socialism, or a jeremiad about the iniquities of directors, the woeful doings of trade unions, and strikes and their effects (according to your political ideals); but reflect once more that this is likely to be boneless and second-hand. Unless you know the wages, hours, prospects, wants, and aims of each class of railway men, you will be only maundering. And, anyhow, if this had been wanted you would have been asked for it. "The present unrest among railway servants", or something of this kind, would have been set. It was not.

Reject all that stuff. Try something else, something that really interests *you*; for example:

The station from which you start for your favourite kind of holiday: that has a pleasant taste in your mind;

Or the station that you stop at for this holiday, or, if you live in the country, the journey home from school and your arrival at your own station;

Or some queer place where you get turned out to change, it may be in the grey early morning—at Carlisle, or Carstairs, or Perth, if you go to Scotland, or at Bâle or Berne, if you have the luck to be taken to Switzerland in winter—and hurry off to swallow scalding coffee and rolls;

Or some tiresome way-side junction where you have often had to wait, impatient to get on to the pleasures ahead of you. Waiting is a bore, but you do not altogether hate the place.

Or do you not remember your first long night journey alone? You probably felt it was rather an adventure. Can't you recall how, having got your seat, you walked up and down the platform, trying to feel much older than you were; how you went and ogled the engine, told the guard to wake you at wherever it was; then how you settled down in your rug, and, hoping no other passengers would get in, dreamed dreams? Don't boys still dream?

Or have you never stood staring into the blackness, up the line and down, while you

waited for the night mail; seen the glimmer of light on the frosty rails, heard the shunted engine sizzling over there in the dark, and half caught the outline of the steam as it blew now one way and now another, sometimes tinged with the gleam from the fire-box; all the time you were keeping an eye on the signals to catch that red one wink into white, telling that "she's signalled"; then you heard her, and saw her come rushing round the curve—"with *two* engines to-night, by Jove"—and off you went.

"And, all unseen,
Romance brought up the 9.15."

Yes, a prosy quotation, I dare say, but it wasn't prosy when its maker wrote it. If you choose some one of these personal lines of thought you will at any rate write something which has *you* in it.

Scholar. But a number of people will choose the same.

Dominie. True; but the essays will not be the same, because each writer will treat his choice his own way.

Scholar. H'm—it seems to me that I have to do a heap of thinking before I begin.

Dominie. Just so. You will find that if you take any of the usual subjects you can

think them over as we have done with "A Railway Station". You will learn as much from collecting, rejecting, and arranging as you will from writing. But with a little practice you will learn to reject quickly. You soon recognize what is either rubbish or useless for your purpose. That is to say, you have made the first step in the most difficult portion of criticism: you are beginning to be able to criticize yourself.

An Interlude

Here it is, again, in another shape—

TO SOME ESSAYISTS

*How you did waste your time! Could you not find
Some vestiges of reason in your noddle?
Could not "A Railway Station" bring to mind
Something to say which was not purely twaddle?*

*The "average passenger" of course arrives,
"Duly secures" his seat and luncheon basket;
The train "conveys its freight of human lives"
Of course "unconscious of their doom"—why
ask it?*

*They all were there: the "sturdy porter" who
"Shoulders your box", the "attentive guard",
the trolley
"Laden with Christmas fare"—old woman too,
"Fussy", of course because she's lost her brolly.*

And then you moralized—i' faith, you did—

“Life's journey”: its “inevitable termination”:

“Surely,” you said, “we find a lesson hid . . .”

And then you wound up with an exclamation.

.

Can you not see the night-express—in dream—

The blur of red and green through the rain falling,

While the wind twists the restless curling steam,

Have you no ears to hear its echoes calling?

Can you not see—half-bridge, half-station—there—

High perched o'er Teviot, with the sun sinking

Behind the western hills, whence the keen air

Blows all these hundred miles to set you thinking?

Can you not see how Magic, from her cup,

Spills on the commonplace a golden glory,

Nor how the thought of platform “down” or “up”

Means Paradise, or back to purgatory?

No! I suppose you can't; you are too young,

Childhood and you not far enough asunder,

Too light of heart to catch the songs unsung,

Too near the Golden Days to miss their wonder.

§ IV

Some Further Words on Merits

YOU are expected to be clear, to be orderly, to use good English, and to have something to say. Many people will attain these things, and yet to do really well you must get a step or two further. You should say what you have to say deftly and neatly, and your essay should have something that is *original* about it.

I. ON OTHER PEOPLE'S MERITS

Neatness of expression can best be learnt from studying others. To that end you should read the writings of the great essayists with your eyes open, not only for what they have to say, but also for the way that they say it. To take a few examples: in Macaulay you should notice the orderliness and brilliance of the arrangement, the logical march of the sentences, each illustrating and developing the subject in hand; in Bacon you will be chiefly struck by

the brevity and force of the sentences and the profundity of the thought—no other writer packs so much into so scanty space; in Emerson the riches of a mind are poured out in a profusion which seems almost careless, so full is he of illustration, of high thought, of ideas prodigally flung together. Lamb's essays have the charm of a kindly nature shining on them. To read them is to learn to love the man who "expresses himself" (in the proper sense of the term) so simply, so cleanly, so gently through all his troubles. To my mind Macaulay's work is like some gorgeous tapestry, Bacon's like a single diamond, Emerson's like the jewels of Aladdin's cave, and Lamb's like a bunch of wild flowers. You may not agree; but if you study them enough to disagree, you will have learnt something. And study will reveal what is characteristic in Stevenson, in Hazlitt, in Addison, in de Quincey, and in others too numerous to mention—but all different.¹

To help in this there are gathered in the Appendix to this book a few extracts from typical essays. Every critic will agree that a much better selection might have been made, but let that pass. They will serve for study.

¹ If you read French easily, you will realize that many French essays are models of what is clear, brief, and direct.

If you use them rightly you may learn many things. You will see, for example, how ideas are grouped in a paragraph. You find endless illustration of neatness of phrase, of metaphors and similes kept in hand, of the "right word", of happy turns of thought, of epigram, aphorism and irony, and other skill in letters. You can amuse yourself by reading each attentively two or three times till you master the thread of the extract, and then trying to reproduce it as closely as may be; and you can humiliate yourself by comparing your version with the original. Mind you, you are not to set yourself down to copy slavishly; that will be disastrous, as surely as attempts to "play like" great batsmen or great golfers will produce a low score in one case and a high one in the other. Remember the Ass in the Lion's skin. Yet the imitative faculty is a stairway to inspiration; the first step in learning to do a little better than badly is to understand how others do well.

2. ON ORIGINALITY

Here it is not a question of other people's merits, but of your own. Your essay should have something original about it—something that is your own.

This sounds difficult, and perhaps you will say that on a good many subjects which are set to you it is almost impossible. But it is not nearly so hard as it seems. Of course, now and again, all that you are asked to do is to sum up known facts, or other people's opinions. Most political subjects and historical subjects are of this kind; though even here, if you have really thought about your subject, the thought is bound to show—and you will be to that extent original. For originality is, after all, only the reflection from your mind of common notions—notions, that is to say, which are the common property of anyone who likes to use them.

Did you ever see that somewhat antiquated toy called a kaleidoscope, which used to bewilder your parents when they were children? I suppose it has gone into limbo long ago. It consisted of a few scraps of coloured glass in a tube of which the sides were made of reflecting surfaces. Every time you shook it the scraps took a fresh order, and the reflectors repeated it in a new pattern. These were not perhaps very beautiful, but I believe the thing was used by mid-Victorian designers of wall-papers who had run out of ideas. Well, the scraps are your materials; you shake and reflect, and the result is—of a sort—original.

No two of us see the same object in the same light, or see the same qualities in it. To you a motor car is a familiar necessity; to me it is a novelty with a smack of witchcraft about its humming interior; to the socialist it is the emblem of what Mr. Punch called the *mauvais riches*; to the policeman it is a potential law-breaker; to the infirm it is an object of terror. The steep crags of Snowdon are to the artist picturesque, to the economist barren and unproductive soil, to the rock-climber a playground, to the nervous tourist a mass of horrible precipices. These are only divisions into classes. But just because no two boys are alike—you know that; *you are certain that no one else in your form is exactly like you, and remember everyone else feels the same about himself*—it follows that no two of you really see any subject in the same way. *If you will give your mind a chance* it is bound to be to some extent original.

But you must give it that chance. It will wish to be lazy, to run along in some one else's groove, to repeat what it has heard other people say that they see, instead of looking for itself. You must use *your eyes* and *your brain*.

For example, nine boys out of ten, if they be asked to describe any natural object—a view, a

place, and so on—describe by *shape* and not by *colour*. You doubt it? Very well then, look over a set of essays done on, say, “your favourite view”, or “a misty morning”, or any subject of that kind, and you will soon observe the fact for yourself. For some reason, colour makes little impression, or at any rate the writer is too lazy to record it. Yet in looking at a picture of a landscape the first thing every one remarks is the colour, and in nature, if you will look for colours, you will see them in infinite variety; but to no two minds will the same shade appeal in the same way. The colour of a distant hill, for example—with whatever word you describe it you will almost inevitably group some notion: those blue greys seem to some “cold”, to others “mysterious”, “dim”, “restful”, “faint”, “melancholy”, and so forth.

Scholar. But all these epithets have been used many times. You don't call that being original.

Dominie. Yes it is, *so long as the suggestion is made through your eyes to your mind*, and not by your memory of what some one else has said. It may not be original to the world, but it is original *to you*. And from that you will get on, and some day you will stumble on some idea or

phrase which has the rarer originality about it; and having done it once you will have the luck to do it now and again. But these observations of yours must be real and honest. If you "sham", and pretend to see what you do not, and feel what you do not, you will certainly betray yourself as a humbug.

The fact is that you must not be shy. This is a hard saying, for every beginner is distrustful of his own ideas, and unwilling to put down on paper what seems to him to be private. It is a natural feeling. Every one has inner and secret places in his mind—a sort of workshop which he is reluctant to show to the outsider. He is reluctant for good reasons: he fears that the intruder may be unworthy of admission, unsympathetic, unkindly, cold; worst of all, he might laugh, and the echo of an alien laugh in the mind's workshop is never forgotten, and unforgivable. Besides, all sorts of things are stored there, growing, not yet ready for the day. Still, if you will not even open the door of this workshop ever so little, never bring out any of the boyish treasures because you are not quite sure that they are worth anything, never admit any reader to have some glimpse of that complicated medley of hopes, and plans, and fears, and swift thoughts, and long memories

which is called your mind, you may attain skill in writing, but you will get no further.

The two highest compliments which your ideas can draw from your reader or critic are that he should say: "That's good! I should not have thought of that; but it's true," or "Why, that's exactly what I feel myself, and no one else ever seems to see it." In other words, here are the qualities of *originality* and *sympathy*.

There is, you see, something else which can be likened to the householder who bringeth forth out of his treasury things new and old.

The Model Essay

Scholar. What are all these blank pages for?

Dominie. For the Model Essay, of course.

Scholar. Well, why don't you write it, then?

Dominie. Not I, my friend; that's your business.

Scholar. O—oh!

ENVOI

Prince—when you write
Be careful, do;
Pray keep in sight
A Beast or two;
Calm and sedate
Your point refine,
Don't emulate
The Porcupine.

Be sure you know,
Ere you set out,
Whither you'd go,
Nor lengthen out
Parenthesis
In cumbrous style—
Don't be as is
The Crocodile.

Don't shake the ground
With trampling feet,
Nor wallow round,
But clean and neat
Dive in; your dip
Is better thus—
Not as the Hip-
Popotamus.

What's said is said—
For simple stuff
That's in your head
Once is enough;
Don't buzz and buzz
Eternally
Around, as does
The Bumble-bee.

APPENDIX

Appendix: Some Styles Considered

THIS collection may be useful to those who wish to improve, or to exercise their wits a little. Of course it is haphazard and inadequate; equally of course there are endless things to be learnt from even these brief extracts besides the points I suggest. One may endeavour to placate critics by hoping that at any rate it can do no harm.

I. BACON

EXTRACT FROM ESSAY "OF DELAY"

[A boy is often inclined to spin out what he has to say till it becomes thin. If trained on classical mythology he will be given to allusions to it, often of a commonplace character, and he will explain them at needless length. He writes long involved sentences. Observe the use of brief sentences; and see what hinders the classical allusions from appearing pedantic.]

Fortune is like the market; where many times, if you can stay a little, the price will fall. And again, it is sometimes like Sibylla's offer; which at first

offereth the commodity at full then consumeth part and part, and still holdeth up the price. For *Occasion* (as it is in the common verse) *turneth a bald noddle, after she hath presented her locks in front, and no hold taken*; or at least turneth the handle of the bottle first to be received, and after the belly, which is hard to clasp. There is surely no greater wisdom than well to time the beginnings and onsets of things. Dangers are no more light, if they once seem light; and more dangers have deceived men than forced them. Nay, it were better to meet some dangers half-way, though they come nothing near, than to keep too long a watch upon their approaches; for if a man watch too long, it is odds he will fall asleep. On the other side, to be deceived with too long shadows (as some have been when the moon was low and shone on their enemy's back), and so to shoot off before the time; or to teach dangers to come on, by over-early buckling towards them; is another extreme. The ripeness or unripeness of the occasion (as we said) must ever be well weighed; and generally it is good to commit the beginnings of all great actions to Argus with his hundred eyes, and the ends to Briareus with his hundred hands; first to watch, and then to speed. For the helmet of Pluto, which maketh the politic man go invisible, is secrecy in the counsel and celerity in the execution. For when things are once come to the execution, there is no secrecy comparable to celerity; like the motion of a bullet in the air, which flieth so swift as it outruns the eye.

2. BACON

EXTRACT FROM ESSAY "OF GREAT PLACE"

[You have been told not to "moralize" or "preach". See what there is in this extract that redeems it from the charge of doing either of these things.]

All rising to great place is by a winding stair; and if there be factions, it is good to side a man's self whilst he is in the rising, and to balance himself when he is placed. Use the memory of thy predecessor fairly and tenderly; for if thou dost not, it is a debt will sure be paid when thou art gone. If thou have colleagues, respect them, and rather call them when they look not for it, than exclude them when they have reason to look to be called. Be not too sensible or too remembering of thy place in conversation and private answers to suitors; but let it rather be said, *When he sits in place he is another man.*

3. EMERSON

EXTRACT FROM ESSAY ON "COMPENSATION"

[Paragraphs should have topic sentences; mark them here. Beginners' essays often suffer from lack of illustration: this is in reality lack of thought, because the homeliest of illustrations are often the best. Beginners endeavour to use metaphors and similes far too elaborately. See here how they are used and dropped quickly.]

A man cannot speak but he judges himself. With his will or against his will he draws his portrait to the eye of his companions by every word. Every opinion

reacts on him who utters it. It is a thread-ball thrown at a mark, but the other end remains in the thrower's bag. Or rather it is a harpoon hurled at the whale, unwinding, as it flies, a coil of cord in the boat, and, if the harpoon is not good, or not well thrown, it will go nigh to cut the steersman in twain or to sink the boat.

You cannot do wrong without suffering wrong. "No man had ever a point of pride that was not injurious to him" said Burke. The exclusive in fashionable life does not see that he excludes himself from enjoyment, in the attempt to appropriate it. The exclusionist in religion does not see that he shuts the door of heaven on himself, in striving to shut out others. Treat men as pawns and ninepins and you shall suffer as well as they. If you leave out their heart, you shall lose your own. The senses would make things of all persons; of women, of children, of the poor. The vulgar proverb, "I will get it from his purse or get it from his skin", is sound philosophy.

All infractions of love and equity in our social relations are speedily punished. They are punished by fear. Whilst I stand in simple relations to my fellow-man, I have no displeasure in meeting him. We meet as water meets water, or as two currents of air mix, with perfect diffusion and interpenetration of nature. But as soon as there is any departure from simplicity and attempt at halfness, or good for me that is not good for him, my neighbour feels the wrong; he shrinks from me as far as I have shrunk from him; his eyes no longer seek mine; there is war between us; there is hate in him and fear in me.

All the old abuses in society, universal and particular, all unjust accumulations of property and power, are avenged in the same manner. Fear is an instructor of great sagacity and the herald of all revolutions. One thing he teaches, that there is rottenness where he appears. He is a carrion crow, and though you see not well what he hovers for, there is death somewhere. Our property is timid, our laws are timid, our cultivated classes are timid. Fear for ages has boded and mowed and gibbered over government and property. That obscene bird is not there for nothing. He indicates great wrongs which must be revised.

4. G. M. TREVELYAN

EXTRACT FROM "CLIO, A MUSE; AND OTHER
ESSAYS"

[What is here said by Mr. Trevelyan about Macaulay's treatment of narrative history is also true of essays. Macaulay's methods of arrangement cannot be studied properly in short extracts, but his style can be studied. In what is it "open to criticism" ?]

In "arrangement", that is to say, in the planning of the book, in the way subject leads on to subject and paragraph to paragraph, Macaulay's *History* has no equal, and ought to be carefully studied by every one who intends to write a narrative history. His "style", the actual form of his sentences, ought not to be imitated, partly because it is open to criticism, still more because it was his own and inimitable. But if anybody could imitate his "arrangement" and then

invent a "style" as effective for our age as Macaulay's was for his, he would be able to make the best results of the modern history school familiar to hundreds of thousands, and influential on all the higher thought and feeling of the day.

5. MACAULAY

EXTRACT FROM "MACHIAVELLI"

In this respect no history suggests more important reflections than that of the Tuscan and Lombard commonwealths. The character of the Italian statesman seems, at first sight, a collection of contradictions, a phantom as monstrous as the portress of hell in Milton, half divinity, half snake, majestic and beautiful above, grovelling and poisonous below. We see a man whose thoughts and words have no connection with each other, who never hesitates at an oath when he wishes to seduce, who never wants a pretext when he is inclined to betray. His cruelties spring, not from the heat of blood, or the insanity of uncontrolled power, but from deep and cool meditation. His passions, like well-trained troops, are impetuous by rule, and in their most headstrong fury never forget the discipline to which they have been accustomed. His whole soul is occupied with vast and complicated schemes of ambition: yet his aspect and language exhibit nothing but philosophical moderation. Hatred and revenge eat into his heart: yet every look is a cordial smile, every gesture a familiar caress. He never excites the suspicion of his adversaries by petty provocations. His purpose is disclosed only when it is accomplished.

His face is unruffled, his speech is courteous, till vigilance is laid asleep, till a vital point is exposed, till a sure aim is taken; and then he strikes for the first and last time. Military courage, the boast of the sottish German, of the frivolous and prating Frenchman, of the romantic and arrogant Spaniard, he neither possesses nor values. He shuns danger, not because he is insensible to shame, but because, in the society in which he lives, timidity has ceased to be shameful. To do an injury openly is, in his estimation, as wicked as to do it secretly, and far less profitable. With him the most honourable means are those which are the surest, and speediest, and the darkest. He cannot comprehend how a man should scruple to deceive those whom he does not scruple to destroy. He would think it madness to declare open hostilities against rivals whom he might stab in a friendly embrace, or poison in a consecrated wafer.

Yet this man, black with the vices which we consider as most loathsome, traitor, hypocrite, coward, assassin, was by no means destitute even of those virtues which we generally consider as indicating superior elevation of character. In civil courage, in perseverance, in presence of mind, those barbarous warriors, who were foremost in the battle or the breach, were far his inferiors. Even the dangers which he avoided with a caution almost pusillanimous never confused his perceptions, never paralysed his inventive faculties, never wrung out one secret from his smooth tongue, and his inscrutable brow. Though a dangerous enemy, and a still more dangerous accomplice, he could be a just and beneficent ruler.

6. G. M. TREVELYAN

EXTRACT FROM "CLIO, A MUSE; AND OTHER
ESSAYS"

[Something has been said of "originality"—that is to say, the capacity of looking at facts from a novel standpoint. In the following extract the facts that Oxford was the King's chief stronghold in the Civil War, that the Court dwelt in St. John's College, and that in the end Oxford had to be abandoned when Charles marched off to his last field at Naseby, are well known. But see how much is here made plain by the skill with which the writer himself grasps the feelings of the men and women beleaguered in the city. This is the work of sympathy. Note also the phrasing, the use of exactly the right word, especially of the right adjective. Find examples for yourself: you can hardly miss them.]

The value and pleasure of travel, whether at home or abroad, is doubled by a knowledge of history. For places, like books, have an interest or a beauty of association, as well as an absolute or æsthetic beauty. The garden front of St. John's, Oxford, is beautiful to every one; but, for the lover of history, its outward charm is blent with the intimate feelings of his own mind, with images of that same College as it was during the Great Civil War. Given over to the use of a Court whose days of royalty were numbered, its walks and quadrangles were filled, as the end came near, with men and women learning to accept sorrow as their lot through life, the ambitious abandoning hope of power, the wealthy hardening themselves to embrace poverty,

those who loved England preparing to sail for foreign shores, and lovers to be parted for ever. There they strolled through the garden, as the hopeless evenings fell, listening, at the end of all, while the siege-guns broke the silence with ominous iteration. Behind the cannon on those low hills to northward were ranked the inexorable men who came to lay their hands on all this beauty, hoping to change it to strength and sterner virtue. And this was the curse of the victors, not to die, but to live, and almost to lose their awful faith in God, when they saw the Restoration, not of the old gaiety that was too gay for them, and the old loyalty that was too loyal for them, but of corruption and selfishness that had neither country nor king. The sound of the Roundhead cannon has long ago died away, but still the silence of the garden is heavy with unalterable fate, brooding over besiegers and besieged, in such haste to destroy each other and permit only the vile to survive. St. John's College is not mere stone and mortar, tastefully compiled, but an appropriate and mournful witness between those who see it now and those by whom it once was seen. And so it is, for the reader of history, with every ruined castle and ancient church throughout the wide, mysterious lands of Europe.

7. G. K. CHESTERTON

EXTRACT FROM "G. F. WATTS"

[Care for "style" may be carried so far that the product may become laboured or artificial or unconvincing. We get the impression that the writer is more anxious to convince us of his own cleverness than of his opinions. Consider how far some such judgment applies to the following extract. Compare it with the previous extract. Both deal more or less with the same idea. Which possesses the more dignity, the more sympathy, the more appreciation of human ideals, even when broken? What are the reasons for your answer? Consider also which is likely to prove more comprehensible in, say, two hundred years' time—why?]

It will appear to many a somewhat grotesque matter to talk about a period in which most of us were born and which has only been dead a year or two, as if it were a primal Babylonian empire of which only a few columns are left crumbling in the desert. And yet such is, in spirit, the fact. There is no more remarkable psychological element in history than the way in which a period can suddenly become unintelligible. To the early Victorian period we have in a moment lost the key: the Crystal Palace is the temple of a forgotten creed. The thing always happens sharply: a whisper runs through the salons, Mr. Max Beerbohm waves a wand and a whole generation of great men and great achievement suddenly looks mildewed and unmeaning. We see precisely the same thing in that

other great reaction towards art and the vanities, the Restoration of Charles II. In that hour both the great schools of faith and valour which had seemed either angels or devils to all men: the dreams of Strafford and the great High Churchmen on the one hand; the Moslem frenzy of the English Commons, the worship of the English law upon the other; both seemed distant and ridiculous. The new Cavalier despised the old Cavalier even more than he despised the Roundhead. The last stand of English chivalry dwindled sharply to the solitary figure of the absurd old country gentleman drinking wine out of an absurd old flagon. The great roar of Roundhead psalms which cried out that the God of Battles was loosed in English meadows shrank to a single snuffle. The new and polite age saw the old and serious one exactly as we see the early Victorian era: they saw it, that is to say, not as splendid, not as disastrous, not as fruitful, not as infamous, not as good or bad, but simply as ugly. Just as we can see nothing about Lord Shaftesbury but his hat, they could see nothing about Cromwell but his nose. There is no doubt of the shock and sharpness of the silent transition. The only difference is that accordingly as we think of man and his nature, according to our deepest intuitions about things, we shall see in the Restoration and the *fin de siècle* philosophy a man waking from a turbid and pompous dream, or a man hurled from heaven and the wars of the angels.

8. CHARLES LAMB

EXTRACT FROM "NEW YEAR'S EVE—ESSAYS
OF ELIA"

[Study the arrangement, and the skill with which the writer has taken the idea of New Year's Day—upon which all of us could be intolerably prosy and commonplace—on to a new level. Observe that this is not done by a display of learning, or "eloquence": see how the extract works to its deft conclusion.]

Every man hath two birthdays: two days, at least, in every year, which set him upon revolving the lapse of time, as it affects his mortal duration. The one is that which in an especial manner he termeth *his*. In the gradual desuetude of old observances, this custom of solemnizing our proper birthday hath nearly passed away, or is left to children, who reflect nothing at all about the matter, nor understand anything in it beyond cake and orange. But the birth of a New Year is of an interest too wide to be pretermitted by king or cobbler. No one ever regarded the First of January with indifference. It is that from which all date their time, and count upon what is left. It is the nativity of our common Adam.

9. CHARLES LAMB

EXTRACT FROM "A COMPLAINT OF THE DECAY OF
BEGGARS IN THE METROPOLIS—ESSAYS OF ELIA"

[It is difficult to say where precisely the charm of Lamb's essays lies: and if one attempts to define the whereabouts, it is harder still to get others to agree in the definition. He has so many charms—perhaps the greatest, the kindly heart within him. Remark this quality in these extracts.]

Observe also that both Bacon and Lamb talk to you, but that they are most unlike each other; that is partly because they do talk. If they were to admonish they would both lose something that one may call originality. Why?

If a Goliath roundly declared that Lamb's style was affected and archaic, that his subjects were trivial, and that he was insufferably egotistical, how would you rout the Philistine?]

Pauperism, pauper, poor man, are expressions of pity, but pity alloyed with contempt. No one properly contemns a beggar. Poverty is a comparative thing, and each degree of it is mocked by its "neighbour grice". Its poor rents and comings-in are soon summed up and told. Its pretences to property are almost ludicrous. Its pitiful attempts to save excite a smile. Every scornful companion can weigh his trifle-bigger purse against it. Poor man reproaches poor man in the streets with impolitic mention of his condition, his own being a shade better, while the rich pass by and jeer at both. No rascally comparative insults a Beggar, or thinks of weighing purses with him. He is not in the scale of

comparison. He is not under the measure of property. He confessedly hath none, any more than a dog or a sheep. No one twitteth him with ostentation above his means. No one accuses him of pride, or upbraideth him with mock humility. None jostle with him for the wall, or pick quarrels for precedency. No wealthy neighbour seeketh to eject him from his tenement. No man sues him. No man goes to law with him. If I were not the independent gentleman that I am, rather than I would be a retainer to the great, a led captain, or a poor relation, I would choose, out of the delicacy and the greatness of my mind, to be a beggar.

10. CHARLES LAMB

EXTRACT FROM "GRACE BEFORE MEAT—
ESSAYS OF ELIA"

The form then of the benediction before eating has its beauty at a poor man's table, or at the simple and unprovocative repast of children. It is here that the grace becomes exceedingly graceful. The indigent man, who hardly knows whether he shall have a meal the next day or not, sits down to his fare with a present sense of the blessing, which can be but feebly acted by the rich, into whose minds the conception of wanting a dinner could never, but by some extreme theory, have entered. The proper end of food—the animal sustenance—is barely contemplated by them. The poor man's bread is his daily bread, literally his bread for the day. Their courses are perennial.

Again, the plainest diet seems the fittest to be preceded by the grace. That which is least stimulative

to appetite, leaves the mind most free for foreign considerations. A man may feel thankful, heartily thankful, over a dish of plain mutton with turnips, and have leisure to reflect upon the ordinance and institution of eating; when he shall confess a perturbation of mind, inconsistent with the purposes of the grace, at the presence of venison or turtle. When I have sate (a *rarus hospes*) at rich men's tables, with the savoury soup and messes steaming up the nostrils, and moistening the lips of the guests with desire and a distracted choice, I have felt the introduction of that ceremony to be unseasonable. With the ravenous orgasm upon you, it seems impertinent to interpose a religious sentiment. It is a confusion of purpose to mutter out praises from a mouth that waters. The heats of epicurism put out the gentle flame of devotion. The incense which rises round is pagan, and the belly-god intercepts it for his own. The very excess of the provision beyond the needs takes away all sense of proportion between the end and means. The giver is veiled by his gifts. You are startled at the injustice of returning thanks—for what?—for having too much, while so many starve. It is to praise the Gods amiss.

II. R. L. STEVENSON

EXTRACT FROM "THE LANTERN BEARERS— ACROSS THE PLAINS"

[*The bearing of this for the young essay-writer?*]

It is said that a poet has died young in the breast of the most stolid. It may be contended, rather, that this

(somewhat minor) bard in almost every case survives, and is the spice of life to his possessor. Justice is not done to the versatility and the unplumbed childishness of man's imagination. His life from without may seem but a rude mound of mud; there will be some golden chamber at the heart of it, in which he dwells delighted; and for as dark as his pathway seems to the observer, he will have some kind of bull's-eye at his belt.

12. R. L. STEVENSON

EXTRACT FROM "VIRGINIBUS PUERISQUE"

[Stevenson's writings always give the impression of limpidity: they are so clear and flow so evenly. You would guess that he wrote without effort—and your guess would be entirely wrong. No one gave more pains to his work than Stevenson: that is something to be laid to heart by ordinary pedestrians. In this extract, find many examples of "exactly the right word". Remark also that though "you" is used throughout, the essay is not colloquial, nor the style conversational. Why not? What quality in it saves it from loss of dignity?]

Times are changed with him who marries; there are no more by-path meadows, where you may innocently linger, but the road lies long and straight and dusty to the grave. Idleness, which is often becoming and even wise in the bachelor, begins to wear a different aspect when you have a wife to support. Suppose, after you are married, one of those little slips were to befall you. What happened last November might surely

happen February next. They may have annoyed you at the time, because they were not what you had meant; but how will they annoy you in the future, and how will they shake the fabric of your wife's confidence and peace! A thousand things unpleasing went on in the *chiaroscuro* of a life that you shrank from too particularly realizing; you did not care, in those days, to make a fetish of your conscience; you would recognize your failures with a nod, and so, good day. But the time for these reserves is over. You have wilfully introduced a witness into your life, the scene of these defeats, and can no longer close the mind's eye upon uncomely passages, but must stand up straight and put a name upon your actions. And your witness is not only the judge, but the victim of your sins; not only can she condemn you to the sharpest penalties, but she must herself share feelingly in their endurance. And observe, once more, with what temerity you have chosen precisely *her* to be your spy, whose esteem you value highest, and whom you have already taught to think you better than you are. You may think you had a conscience, and believed in God; but what is a conscience to a wife? Wise men of yore erected statues of their deities, and consciously performed their part in life before those marble eyes. A god watched them at the board, and stood by their bedside in the morning when they woke; and all about their ancient cities, where they bought and sold, or where they piped and wrestled, there would stand some symbol of the things that are outside of man. These were lessons, delivered in the quiet dialect of art, which told their story faithfully, but gently. It is the same lesson, if you will—

but how harrowingly taught!—when the woman you respect shall weep from your unkindness or blush with shame at your misconduct. Poor girls in Italy turn their painted Madonnas to the wall: you cannot set aside your wife. To marry is to domesticate the Recording Angel. Once you are married, there is nothing left for you, not even suicide, but to be good.

13. R. L. STEVENSON

EXTRACT FROM “CRABBED AGE AND YOUTH—
VIRGINIBUS PUERISQUE”

[Find the topic sentence. Further illustration of “the right word” (the word you or I would not have hit on). The meaning of a paradox? the value of an ending that leaves you thinking?]

I overheard the other day a scrap of conversation, which I take the liberty to reproduce. “What I advance is true,” said one. “But not the whole truth,” answered the other. “Sir,” returned the first (and it seemed to me there was a smack of Dr. Johnson in the speech)—“Sir, there is no such thing as the whole truth!” Indeed, there is nothing so evident in life as that there are two sides to a question. History is one long illustration. The forces of nature are engaged, day by day, in cudgelling it into our backward intelligences. We never pause for a moment’s consideration, but we admit it as an axiom. An enthusiast sways humanity exactly by disregarding this great truth, and dinning it into our ears that this or that question has only one possible solution; and your enthusiast is a fine

florid fellow, dominates things for a while and shakes the world out of a doze; but when once he is gone, an army of quiet and uninfluential people set to work to remind us of the other side and demolish the generous imposture. While Calvin is putting everybody exactly right in his *Institutes*, and hot-headed Knox is thundering in the pulpit, Montaigne is already looking at the other side in his library in Perigord, and predicting that they will find as much to quarrel about in the Bible as they had found already in the Church. Age may have one side, but assuredly Youth has the other. There is nothing more certain than that both are right, except perhaps that both are wrong. Let them agree to differ; for who knows but what agreeing to differ may not be a form of agreement rather than a form of difference?

14. HAZLITT

EXTRACT FROM "A DAY BY THE FIRE"—
THE ROUND TABLE

["*I couldn't see anything more*"—"Did you use your eyes?""]

But to attend to our fireside. The evening is beginning to gather in. The window which presents a large face of watery grey, intersected by strong lines, is imperceptibly becoming darker; and as that becomes darker, the fire assumes a more glowing presence. The contemplatist keeps his easy posture, absorbed in his fancies; and everything around him is still and serene. The stillness would even ferment in his ear,

and whisper, as it were, of what the air contained: but every now and then the light ashes shed themselves below, or a stronger, but still a gentle, flame flutters up with a gleam over the chimney. At length, the darker objects in the room mingle; the gleam of the fire streaks with a restless light the edges of the furniture, and reflects itself in the blackening window; while his feet take a gentle move on the fender, and then settle again, and his face comes out of the general darkness, earnest even in indolence, and pale in the very ruddiness of what it looks upon. This is the only time perhaps at which sheer idleness is salutary and refreshing. How observed with the smallest effort is every trick and aspect of the fire! A coal falling in,—a fleetering fume,—a miniature mockery of a flash of lightning, nothing escapes the eye and the imagination. Sometimes a little flame appears at the corner of the grate like a quivering spangle; sometimes it swells out at top into a restless and brief lambency; anon it is seen only by a light beneath the grate, or it curls around one of the bars like a tongue, or darts out with a spiral thinness and a sulphureous and continued puffing as from a reed. The glowing coals meantime exhibit the shifting forms of hills and vales and gulfs,—of fiery Alps, whose heat is uninhabitable even by spirit, or of black precipices, from which swart fairies seem about to spring away on sable wings;—then heat and fire are forgotten, and walled towns appear, and figures of unknown animals, and far-distant countries scarcely to be reached by human journey;—then coaches, and camels, and barking dogs as large as either, and forms that combine

every shape and suggest every fancy;—till at last, the ragged coals tumbling together, reduce the vision to chaos, and the huge profile of a gaunt and grinning face seems to make a jest of all that has passed.—

During these creations of the eye, the thought roves about into a hundred abstractions, some of them suggested by the fire,—some of them suggested by that suggestion,—some of them arising from the general sensation of comfort and composure, contrasted with whatever the world affords of evil, or dignified by high wrought meditation on whatsoever gives hope to benevolence and inspiration to wisdom. The philosopher at such moments plans his Utopian schemes, and dreams of happy certainties which he cannot prove:—the lover, happier and more certain, fancies his mistress with him, unobserved and confiding, his arm round her waist, her head upon his shoulder, and earth and heaven contained in that sweet possession:—the poet, thoughtful as the one, and ardent as the other, springs off at once above the world, treads every turn of the harmonious spheres, darts up with gleaming wings through the sunshine of a thousand systems, and stops not till he has found a perfect paradise, whose fields are of young roses, and whose air is music,—whose waters are the liquid diamond,—whose light is as radiance through crystal,—whose dwellings are laurel bowers,—whose language is poetry,—whose inhabitants are congenial souls,—and to enter the very verge of whose atmosphere strikes beauty on the face, and felicity on the heart.—Alas, that flights so lofty should ever be connected with earth by threads as slender as they are long, and that the least twitch of the most

commonplace hand should be able to snatch down the viewless wanderer to existing comforts!—The entrance of a single candle dissipates at once the twilight and the sunshine, and the ambitious dreamer is summoned to his tea!

15. TWO BROTHERS

EXTRACT FROM "GUESSES AT TRUTH"

[When are similes and metaphors successful? When do we call them apt? Need they be elaborate, or original, or recondite? What is the meaning of mixed metaphors? A great subject will often ennoble a homespun metaphor; a familiar example will often illuminate a remote subject.

"The sublime and the ridiculous": it is better for a beginner to be ridiculous than to be pompous. Be bold, be bold; be not too bold.]

The apparent and the real progress of human affairs are both well illustrated in a waterfall; where the same noisy, bubbling eddies continue for months and years, though the water which froths in them changes every moment. But as every drop in its passage tends to loosen and detach some particle of the channel, the stream is working a change all the time in the appearance of the fall, by altering its bed, and so subjecting the river during its descent to a new set of percussions and reverberations.

And what, when at last effected, is the consequence of this change? The foam breaks into shapes somewhat different: but the noise, the bubbling, and the eddies are just as violent as before.

16. R. E. PROTHERO

EXTRACT FROM "THE PSALMS IN HUMAN LIFE"

[Observe how complete this is.]

When the pages of some ancient brown-bound volume are turned, there flutters from between the leaves the withered petal of a rose. The flower is faded, dry, scentless; but it has imprinted something of its shape and colour on the pages between which it has been pressed. As it floats to the ground, the most unimagined of us is conscious of the desire to read its secret. What moment of joy or sorrow, of despair or hope, did it commemorate in the distant days, when the page was yet unstained, the petal full of fragrance and colour, the hand that placed it there still throbbing with life?

Something similar is the effect of studying the Psalms through human history. There is scarcely a leaf in the Psalter which is not stained by some withered flower of the past. To gather some of these petals and read their meaning, as they fall thick from the pages, has been the purpose of this book. Vain must be the effort to recall to life persons or events divided from us by centuries of change. But as we read the familiar verses, the words bring before us, one by one, the hundreds of men and women who, passing from tribulation into joy, have, in the language of the Psalms, conquered the terrors of death, proclaimed their faith, or risen to new effort and final victory.

17. MANDELL CREIGHTON

“THE EXECUTION OF JEROME OF PRAG—THE
HISTORY OF THE PAPACY”

[This is not an extract from an essay, but it illustrates two things aptly: one the scholar's use of irony; the other is fairly obvious.]

The Council still gave him a few days for consideration, but to no purpose. On May 30 he was brought before a general session in the cathedral. The eloquence of the Bishop of Lodi was again called into request to convince the obstinate heretic of the justice of his doom. When the sermon was over Jerome repeated his withdrawal of his former retractation. Sentence was passed against him, and he was led away to be burnt in the same place as Hus. Like Hus, he went to die with calm and cheerful face. As he left the cathedral he began to chant the Creed and then the Litany. When he reached the place of execution he kneeled before the stake, as though it had been an image of Hus, and prayed. As he was bound he again recited the Creed, and called the people to witness that in that faith he died. When the executioner was going to light the pile at his back, he called to him, “Come in front, and light it before my face; if I had feared death, I would never have come here.” As the flames gathered round him he sang a hymn till his voice was choked by the smoke. As in the case of Hus, his clothes were burned, and his ashes were cast into the Rhine.

The Council had done all that lay in its power to restore peace in Bohemia.

18. BACON

EXTRACT FROM ESSAY "OF STUDIES"

[It is not enough to rest content with writing sense; sense may—often—be expressed in a form which people will remember. One form of pithy summing-up of things we call an epigram: it is not the same as a proverb, nor as a paradox, nor as an aphorism. The "epigrammatic style" is characteristic of some writers. The striving after it often becomes wearisome in unskilful hands, yet to strive after it now and again is the only way to learn to handle it when required, so that your teacher should not reprove you much for "trying to be epigrammatic", even if you fail. Study these models: you will see that you must be brief, you must be sensible, and you must choose the right words before you can write an epigram or anything like it. Remark also the force which is given by antithesis, by setting one thing in contrast to another.]

Crafty men contemn studies: simple men admire them; and wise men use them: for they teach not their own use; but that is a wisdom without them and above them, won by observation. Read not to contradict and confute; nor to believe and take for granted; nor to find talk and discourse; but to weigh and consider. Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested: that is, some books are to be read only in parts; others

to be read, but not curiously ; and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention. Some books also may be read by deputy, and extracts made of them by others ; but that would be only in the less important arguments, and the meaner sort of books ; else distilled books are like common distilled waters, flashy things. Reading maketh a full man ; conference a ready man ; and writing an exact man. And therefore, if a man write little, he had need have a great memory ; if he confer little, he had need have a present wit ; and if he read little, he had need have much cunning, to seem to know that he doth not.

19. EMERSON

EXTRACT FROM ESSAY ON "SELF-RELIANCE"

Another sort of false prayers are our regrets. Discontent is the want of self-reliance : it is infirmity of will. Regret calamities if you can thereby help the sufferer ; if not, attend your own work and already the evil begins to be repaired. Our sympathy is just as base. We come to them who weep foolishly and sit down and cry for company, instead of imparting to them truth and health in rough electric shocks, putting them once more in communication with their own reason. The secret of fortune is joy in our hands. Welcome evermore to gods and men is the self-helping man. For him all doors are flung wide ; him all tongues greet, all honours crown, all eyes follow with desire. Our love goes out to him and embraces him because he did not need it. We solicitously and apolo-

getically caress and celebrate him because he held on his way and scorned our disapprobation. The gods love him because men hated him. "To the persevering mortal," said Zoroaster, "the blessed Immortals are swift."

SOME SCRAPS

When the pit seats itself in the boxes, the gallery will soon drive out both and occupy the whole of the house.
GUESSES AT TRUTH.

Much of this world's wisdom is still acquired by necromancy,—by consulting the oracular dead.
GUESSES AT TRUTH.

Suspensions amongst thoughts are like bats amongst birds, they ever fly by twilight. BACON'S ESSAYS.

I cannot call riches better than the baggage of virtue. The Roman word is better, *impedimenta*. For as the baggage is to an army, so is riches to virtue. It cannot be spared, nor left behind, but it hindreth the march; yea, and the care of it sometimes loseth or disturbeth the victory.
BACON'S ESSAYS.

A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines.
EMERSON'S ESSAYS.

20. N. A. WALTON

ESSAY "A FROSTY MORNING"

[Hitherto we have had extracts from authors of acknowledged skill. Here is a boy's essay, printed exactly as it was written in the Modern Sixth Form at Harrow. It is a young piece of work and bears traces of this. It has some slips also, which you will duly note, but it has merits too. Trace in it that the boy was by nature an artist. You will find evidence, too, that he had a keen sense of the sound of words; this is particularly clear in the last paragraph, where he wishes to express first the idea of the crispness of frost and afterwards of the silence of the snow. Look you, I do not hold that in writing it he deliberately set himself to string consonants which would convey these ideas. He did it subconsciously; he had the happy touch.]

The eastern side of a certain lonely hill is clothed with a wind-swept wood. Above the trees rises the round bare top of the hill, below them the land rolls gently away to the seashore. How beautiful the place looks on a frosty December morning, when the keen east wind blows up from the grey North Sea and sweeps through the tender branches of the wood! Above, the heavy snow-clouds drift in a procession of sombre grey, torn now and then to display behind them a clear, cold blue. Before this ground of unpolished silver and turquoise sway the delicate green branches of the ash, the rugged oak, and the pale-brown hazel. The earth beneath the trees is covered with dead leaves, thin sere shapes which rustle along before the wind, and crackle

beneath the feet. They are full of little diamonds, the frozen tears of nature.

As one gazes upon the delicate shapes and colours, and hears the gentle sighing of the trees, the wood becomes peopled with the folks of long ago. There through the stems of the trees is the flash of mail and the glint of a plump of spears, as the Border raider drives off the sheep from their shelter behind the bare stone walls, to graze them in a Scottish pasture. The Saxon herdsman flying from the Danish invader; the soldiers of Imperial Rome with sad determined faces on their way to the Great Wall; the skin-clad hunter with short sharp spear; all pass beneath the hazel branches and tread the rustling leaves. But the place seems most to belong to an earlier and a wilder race, whose awful priesthood have left the relics of their worship on the rolling shoulder of the hill. On the strange mounds above were performed their fearful and solemn rites. And there, in an age before the Druids, had stood the joyful worshippers of the sun, gazing with outstretched arms at the ball of clear pale gold which rises from the sea and sets behind the Cheviots in a flush of orange and rose. Now the wood seems full of strange primeval creatures, with thin distorted limbs like the bending boughs around them and with shrivelled brown faces like the dry leaves underneath them. These are the people of the woods, that have lived and continue to live in the places unspoiled by man. The rustling sound is not only the wind raising the dead leaves; it is the patter of their little feet on the winter carpet of the woods.

As the warmth from the exertion of climbing the

hill wears off, the thoughts turn to the milder seasons of the year, to the breezy sunlight of a May morning, when the grass is fresh-sprung and the bursting leaves make the wood a delicate mist of grey and green; or when the summer wind blows gently up from the sea across the long grassy fields which shimmer silver under its light caress, and countless wild flowers lazily nod to the music of the leaves above. One thinks of the summer evening, when all is moist and dreamy and the stars come out one by one swimming above luminous haze in a sea of fathomless violet, when the world is drenched in a deep calm broken only by the distant murmur of the sea,

“That to the sleeping woods all night
Singeth a quiet tune”.

The biting wind cuts across such musings, and on looking again at the wood one realizes that the frost is a terrible thing. What before appeared beautiful now seems strange and gaunt. The gentle sighing becomes a piteous moaning, and from the bent branches hang icicles, not the product of a light white frost, but the traces left by a hard black frost and a keen east wind. For in the night the long blue arms of the Ice-king had crept down from their haunts among the frozen mountains of the North, and ice-bound “caverns, measureless to man”, had stolen over the bleak hill-sides and done their silent work, watched only by the clear pale moon. The icy fingers had first chilled the rain-soaked country and then converted the dripping tree-stems into sprays of sparkling diamonds. The wood is filled with a deadly cold. The sighing of

the trees, the rustle of dry leaves, the whistle of the wind through the bare stone walls is the song of Winter, the prelude to the silence of the snow. For the snow is coming, when the roads will be muffled, sharp edges rounded, and the earth laid to sleep beneath her soft white coverlet.

21.

UPON THE QUALITY CALLED "ROMANCE"

[*Here, finally, is a still younger piece of stuff, the work of a fifteen-year-old. Its writer would now criticize it ferociously on the ground that it is altogether too elaborate and fanciful: might even condemn it as sentimental. No doubt some of this criticism is just. But it serves my purpose to illustrate two or three things. In the first place it has the qualities which a teacher is glad to see. It is full of imagination—perhaps over-full; but then it is so much more easy to prune and train a hedgeling briar than to encourage a cabbage. Again, the words are well chosen and the cadence of the sentences is musical. Lastly, the writer can pass easily from things seen with the eyes to things set in the mind. For in truth—and doubtless I should have said this before, but better late than never—there is a great commonwealth of Letters where all who read have admission and fellowship. The essay-writer and his reader may never meet in the flesh, may never even have one mortal acquaintance in common. But they can have the whole world of the Immortals. They know Colonel Newcome and his best coat, uncommon shiny at the seams; Harry Esmond and Rachel meet them, she still thinking of the last verse of In Convertendo, and Barry*

Lyndon swaggers by, casting an impudent leer under her hat ; Captain Costigan comes up to borrow a trifle, and Major Pendennis eyes Major Bagstock askance and wonders how such a fellow got into the service ; Sam is still under orders to reserve his anecdotes till they are called for, and the call comes from each new venturer into the Commonwealth of Letters : Rawdon Crawley and Sir Mulberry Hawke will gamble with anyone who has money to lose. Mark Tapley walks by with a grin on his face after a futile attempt to cheer up Job Trotter ; further down in the room are the ill-favoured countenances of Mr. Squeers, Jonas Chuzzlewit, Bill Sikes, Monsieur Rigaud, Pecksniff, Mr. Carker, Glossin, and Uriah Heep, all in consultation together. It is a relief to turn from them to Long John Silver, sharing a bottle of rum with Dirk Hatteraick, Vanderdecken, Jas. Hook, and Sergeant Bothwell, who is boasting of his ancestry, yet a little ashamed of his companions. There are crowds and crowds of them, heroes and rogues, pretty women and loyal hearts, wits and fools, kings, cardinals, lords and plain fustian men, all ready to know and be known. You say they are not real : you say wrongly ; you and I and our like will die and be forgotten, but these will never die. They will be the same to all generations ; and it is through our acquaintanceship with the Immortals that we may reveal our tastes one to another and share our sympathies.]

It is difficult to define Romance ; it is like attempting to describe the air, it is so universal, so all-embracing. In everything done alone, and out-of-doors, there is much Romance. It lies in walking alone over the broad curving moors, in the tracking of a stream, in

the discovery of some narrow rocky hollow, hidden away in the cleft of the hills: in a lesser degree, in the opening of a new book. Romance comes upon one suddenly in the friendly buffeting of the North Wind, in the tinkle of flowing water heard far off, in the sailing of a cloud's shadow down the opposite slope, across the valley between, and up the hillside to where one stands watching.

Walking alone on a winding road, what pageant may not come to one's sight, round the next bend, suddenly, with the abruptness of a kingfisher's flight over a clear pool; what challenge of dimly-heard music, borne on the freakish wind? The white gleam of the bent grass is really the sun-glitter on the lances of the armies, marching down into Roncesvalles; in that dark wood lies Medoro, and Angelica comes riding on her white palfrey looking for him; over that hillside, which is the Glistening Heath, rides Siegfried, girt with Gram, and wise with a new wisdom; as for that hawk circling high above me, it is really the wide-winged Hippogrif bearing Astolfo to the moon; and so all the well-known things of the moorland are changed by the subtle alchemy of Romance, as when a dark river-pool is lit by the shoaling bravery of the sun's rays, breaking of a sudden through a cloud.

The idea that runs through all Romance is the quest. It is the gold thread showing through the motley embroideries that the centuries have worked, and left unfinished; it is the search for guessed-at, unknown lands, for strange new beauty, for an ultimate good. It shows so strongly in the story of the Argonauts, the adventuring through strange lands, for

a strange prize; in the Norse Sagas it reappears. Later, it becomes the search for the Sangreal; it comes again in the discovery of the New World, instinct with the strange possibilities of the unknown. Thus, shining with the same light amidst so many different surroundings, reflecting them, seemingly altered, yet still the same, as a stream born in the mountains flows down through placid pastures to the sea; thus goes this leit-motif of the quest, that can be traced in all true Romance.

There is a book which contains, for me, all the glamour of Romance, all the simplicity, all the idea of the quest: it is the *Pilgrim's Progress*. What more romantic than Christian's start? There is no material taking thought for the morrow; it has all the enthusiasm of the First Crusade: it is as if a child had said, "I want to go along that road, and see where it leads to; there will be an enchanted castle at the end, I am sure, waiting for me; let's start", whereupon he promptly starts. The main idea is simple, thereby becoming so romantic—the quest, the struggle for eternal beauty, the perilous journey through dark woods to the sunny green fields beyond.

Romance is one of the few things that all hold alike; every child is born with Romance inbred in it; it may be called by different names, it may even be made a term of opprobrium, but it is still as beautiful and as widespread as the red poppy; cultivation may strive to stomp it out, even as red poppies are combated; custom may change its guise, and impose restrictions upon it; but to what end? Romance is eternal, eternal as youth.



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LIBRARY

Los Angeles

This book is DUE on the last date stamped below.

REC'D ED-URC

LD
URC

JUL 13 1970

JUL 13 1970

ED

APR 12 1981

8711

3 1158 00672 0808

UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY

AA 000 352 180 4

